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**MEANINGS FOR A SHOPPING CENTER BRAND – A CASE STUDY**

Master's Thesis  
Department of Marketing  
May 2020

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Title Meanings for a shopping center brand – A case study			
Subject Marketing	Type of the degree Pro gradu	Time of publication May 2020	Number of pages 76 pp. + 2 pcs.
<p>Abstract</p> <p>The purpose of this research is to build comprehensive understanding of the meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand and how brand meanings are formed, as well as develop a model for the formation of shopping center brand meanings.</p> <p>The theoretical framework of this research is composed of two parts. The first addresses the formation of brand meanings in general in individual, social and marketing environments through communication and knowledge. The latter part considers the special characteristics of the shopping center brand. Prior research suggests that the place brand, brand portfolio and customer value evaluated through the needs of the individual are factors that influence the shopping center brand.</p> <p>The empirical research is conducted as a qualitative research and as an instrumental, intensive and explanatory case study. The subject of the case study is a traditional medium size shopping center located in a large city in Finland. A projective method, The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), in which pictures play an important part, is utilized in gathering the empirical data. The research target group consist of a diversified sample of seven participants living in the same city that the case shopping center is located in and who could be determined to be familiar with it. In-depth one-on-one interviews were organized with the participants. Abductive reasoning guides the empirical analysis and the data is analyzed with categorizing it to relevant themes.</p> <p>The findings of this research identified eight central themes of brand meanings attached to a shopping center brand and 23 sub-constructs of meanings. The eight central constructs are <i>togetherness</i>, <i>me-time</i>, <i>convenience</i>, <i>hedonism</i>, <i>merchandise</i>, <i>sense of community</i>, <i>inspiration</i> and <i>culture</i>. <i>Hedonism</i> surfaced as one of the most significant of these and the role of <i>me-time</i> and <i>inspiration</i> were also novel to the field. The model constructed for the formation of shopping center brand meanings was perceived useful and the empirical findings complemented it. Brand meanings were identified to develop in individual, social and marketing environments through communication and knowledge. The role of the individual is a more mediating one whereas the social and marketing environments are more contextual and contributing to the knowledge.</p> <p>The research findings provide further understanding about the formation of brand meanings in the shopping center context. Based on the empirical findings, theory was developed further. Although the research was conducted as an intensive case study of one shopping center, the empirical findings of meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand can be extended and applied to other similar cases. Knowledge gained can be used in the future as the basis for further research and utilized managerially by shopping center professionals and brand management.</p>			
Keywords brand meaning, shopping value, place branding, brand architecture			
Additional information			

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This instrumental case study examines shopping center brand meanings and the how meanings are formed. In this chapter the reader is introduced to the subject and the research topic is justified. Second, the purpose of the research and research questions are specified, and the key concepts defined. At the end of this chapter the whole structure of the research is specified.

### 1.1 Justification of the research topic

In the recent years, there has been several new shopping center projects in Finland. Since 2015, 10 new shopping centers have been built (Finnish Council of Shopping Centers, 2019). At the same time retail industry has gone through a massive change, due to changes in the market dynamics including recession and growth of e-commerce channel. Consumer base remains stable, however more companies are competing against the visitors and revenue (Helsingin Sanomat, 2018). The same issues were recognized by shopping center professionals as the biggest challenges in the industry and this is anticipated to lead to increased competition (Helsingin Sanomat, 2019; Suomen Kauppakeskushdistys, 2019).

In this changing retail market environment, shopping center professionals are left wondering how to respond to the increasing competition for consumers' purchasing power (Kaihatu & Spence, 2016). It has become hard to differentiate with traditional competitive means such as merchandising or location. A positive reputation, the unique *brand*, can be one of the most important sources of sustained competitive advantage for a company because it is not imitable (Barney, 1991). A *brand* goes beyond a trademark since it even has an emotional or subconscious aspect to it (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman & Hansen, 2012, p. 469). The emotional and subconscious aspects of brands are personal meanings attached to it that stretch beyond the functional and more apparent benefits of it (Aaker, 1994). The world we live in is a world of meanings (Lehtonen, 1998, pp. 17–19). A newly emerged perspective considers brand as a portfolio of meanings built through a series of experiences that are co-created in interactions that consumers and other stakeholders have with the brand in different touchpoints (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). Brand meanings are a

relatively new concept that has not yet been researched a lot and this perspective is yet to be applied to the context shopping centers.

It is known that shopping centers that have a better brand image tend to have larger catchment areas, sales and rental incomes (Dennis, Murphy, Marsland, Cockett & Patel, 2002), and that shopping center visits and purchases are highly affected by positive name recall (Haque & Rahman, 2009). A shopping center's brand can be useful and have implications for both B2C and B2B markets. For example, brand attitudes affect the willingness of tenants to renew a contract or a lease in the shopping center context (Roberts & Merrilees, 2007). The indications of the shopping center brand in the B2B context is left out of further scope because of the extent of this paper and attention is focused to the consumer market.

The shopping center industry is also growing in the European scale and shopping centers professionals are beginning to place more value on brand management (Myers, Gore & Liu, 2008). However, there are relatively few studies on image or branding in the industry (Merrilees, Miller & Shao, 2016). The previous research has not encompassed the phenomenon fully. In the recent years, research has mainly been done in Asian context, quantitatively and focused on one or a couple of factors behind consumer behavior in shopping centers like emotions, attractiveness, satisfaction or social interactions (Beiró, 2018; Das & Varshneya, 2017; Kaihatu & Spence, 2016; Kwon, Ha & Im, 2016; Mittal & Jhamb, 2016; Rahman, Wong & Yu, 2016). The idea of branding a shopping center has gotten relatively little attention from researchers and practitioners although the concept of branding is well known for consumer products and branding is as necessary for an environment as it is for products and services (Dennis et al., 2002; Haque & Rahman, 2009).

To conclude, the importance and some benefits of branding a shopping center are known but there is no comprehensive understanding or useful models on how to the brand of a shopping center could be influenced and managed. A shopping center is an example of a complex entity where there are many internal and external stakeholders surrounding it. The complexity of the issue especially calls for knowing your customers and what they value and how they attach meanings to your brand to be able to strengthen that brand relationship. Research needs to be done on how the shopping

center brand is actually comprised in the consumers' minds to be able to better understand and implement the processes of branding a shopping center. This is why this research can take part in the academic discussion adding value on providing understanding of Finland's shopping center brand building.

## 1.2 Purpose of the research and research questions

The purpose of this study is to build comprehensive understanding of the meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand and how, and develop a model for the formation of shopping center brand meanings. This is pursued with examining concepts and mechanisms behind meaning formation and shopping center brands in previous research and by conducting a qualitative empirical research on the subject.

Consequently, the two research questions in this study are the following:

*What kind of meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand?*

*How are brand meanings formed?*

## 1.3 Definition of the key concepts

### *Brand*

According to Kotler et al. (2012, pp. 467–472) brand is a name, symbol, logo, design, image or combination of these which is designed to identify a product or a service and distinguish it from those of their competitors. Moreover, brand is an entity that offers added value above its functional performance. Iglesias and Bonet (2012) consider brand as a portfolio of a portfolio of meanings attached to it. Brand is the embodiment of customer goodwill or their feelings and experiences accumulated during a lifetime of engagement. Brand can be viewed as a holistic, emotional and intangible experience. People no longer consume for merely the functional satisfaction, but consumption has become meaning based and brands can be used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity. *Brand identity* is the way to identify and position itself, brand image is the way the brand is perceived which leads to



psychological and emotional associations in the mind of the consumers. *Brand equity* is the added value the brand endows in a product or service. Brands create greater customer loyalty which provides predictability and security of demand and make the company less vulnerable to competition. (Kotler et al., 2012, pp. 467–472.)

### *Shopping center*

Shopping center or a shopping mall is a defined group of retail and other commercial establishments that is planned, developed, owned and managed as a single property. In Europe, shopping centers are classified to different sizes according gross leasable area (GLA) and its anchor stores. They can also be divided into traditional and specialty shopping centers. Specialty shopping centers are outdoor retail parks, factory outlets and theme-oriented centers. (International Council of Shopping Centers, 2020.) In this study, the term shopping center is used.

### *Anchor*

Most shopping centers have one or two major retailers that are often referred to as anchors. These retailers are courted by the center developer since they attract a significant number of customers and so make the whole shopping center more attracting for other retailers as well. Anchors can get significantly lower lease agreements than other retailers. Department stores are traditionally the most important anchors of shopping centers, but especially in Europe, supermarkets are also important anchors since a more significant amount of income is spent on food compared to the United States. (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 191.)

## **1.4 Structure of the research**

This study contains six chapters. It started with the introduction to the subject through justification of the research topic and research questions definition and the purpose of the research. Next, an overview of the history and development of shopping center is provided with previous research analysis. In chapter three, the theoretical framework of the research is built from previous academic discussions on brand meanings and how they are formed. The special characteristics and implications to the shopping

center brands are considered. To conclude, the synthesis of the theoretical framework is presented at the end of the chapter three. The fourth chapter addresses the methodology used and the data collection and analysis. In turn, in the fifth chapter, the empirical analysis is represented. Lastly, chapter six concludes this thesis with the results, answers to the research questions and its contributions. Also, the liability and limitation of the research are presented and suggestion for further research given.

## 2 THE SHORT HISTORY OF THE SHOPPING CENTER

In this chapter the concept of the shopping center is described further and the history of it is explained along with the most significant and recent research.

The rise of the modern shopping center started in the United States of America in the 1950's affecting the daily activities and social relationships of consumers. Since then the shopping centers have taken over the world. (Beiró, 2018.) Modern shopping centers started to generalize in Finland in the 1980's (Finnish Council of Shopping Centers, 2019). In the recent years, most growth in the shopping center market has occurred in Asia (Kusumowidagdo, Sachari, & Widodo, 2015; Mittal & Jhamb, 2016).

What has driven the change in consumer behavior to attract crowds into the shopping centers and redirect consumption from elsewhere? People visit shopping centers to satisfy different types of needs: from the traditional needs of purchasing to self-expressing and keeping familiar, romantic and social relationships (Beiró, 2018). In the modern world shopping centers are considered as the places where people enjoy their time and satisfy their recreational and social needs rather than simply fulfilling their functional needs (Das & Varshneya, 2017). Due to the variety of the consumer drivers visiting the shopping centers, it is vital to be attractive. Mittal and Jhamb (2016) suggest that the main determinants of the shopping center attractiveness are merchandising, variety, convenience and milieu.

### 2.1 Shopping center attractiveness

As mentioned, shopping center attractiveness is a multidimensional value. Merchandising and tenant variety induce excitement in a shopping center setting and influence the consumer's image of the center and desire to stay (Wakefield & Baker, 1998). Merchandising represents the 'core product' of a shopping center (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 190; Smith & Burns, 1996). Four merchandise-related items have been identified in literature: *assortment, quality, pricing and styling or fashion* (Bell, 1999; Wong, Lu & Lan Yuan, 2001). A shopping center that offers a large variety of stores is likely to attract more customers as it allows one-stop shopping (Das & Varshneya, 2017).

Services are important as they represent the augmented product that supports the core product, the merchandising, and add value to the whole shopping experience through e.g. easiness, convenience and comfortability. In literature, references to service are usually confined into the actual service experience, the personal service, such as courtesy, knowledge and friendliness. Nevertheless, in addition to the personal service, shopping centers offer communal services, escalators, lifts and guidance as well as amenities like restrooms and family rooms. (Sit, Merrilees & Birch, 2003.)

Given the increased role of shopping centers as a leisure activity rather than purely a purchase activity, to increase patronage, a shopping center should built up convenience and to be easily accessible as well as to minimize the search times and psychological costs of customers like stress and frustration (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 186). Accessibility describes the ease of getting in and out of a shopping center (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 213). It can be further divided into macro and micro levels. Macro-accessibility concerns road conditions and the proximity of the center from the customer's home or workplace. Micro-accessibility on the other hand refers to parking facilities, for example, and the ease of navigation within the shopping center. (Sit et al., 2003.)

In previous research, crowding has been identified as a major factor influencing shopping experience (Turley & Milliman, 2000). It creates psychological stress due to excessive stimulation to the sensory system. Perceived crowding is subjective in nature. Some people enjoy it, as some have a low tolerance for it. (Das & Varshneya, 2017.) As Machleit, Eroglu and Mantel (2000) suggest, understanding and expecting crowding in certain times increases the tolerance of it and the effect it has on the experience.

To attract new potential shoppers, in addition to the utilitarian values such as way-finding, circulation paths or navigation, shopping center developers, managers and operators should focus on the experiential or sensorial values that are part of interior décor, such as shopping space, shopping center ambience and atmospheric environment (Rahman et al., 2016.)

As shopping centers serve multiple purposes from purchasing to social gatherings, for some, making a trip to a shopping center can be a merely a compulsory thing to do occasionally and for some it can also be a way to relax (Das & Varshneya, 2017). Approach behaviors describe the act of consumers engaging and showing interest in exploring retail environments. On the contrary, avoidance behaviors are exhibited by those who have little interest for exploring or returning to certain retail environments or are unwilling or reluctant to do so. The tendency to spend more time in retail environments, willingness to interact with others, willingness to buy and likelihood of recommending varies between these two approaches. (Rahman et al., 2016.) Not all consumers enjoy visiting shopping centers, which needs to be acknowledged.

Shopping centers function as places for different kinds of social gatherings but in addition to spending time together, a shopping center can be a place to have time for yourself. If process of buying and going to the shopping center itself feels like you are treating yourself and develops a feel of self-gratification, the value gained exceeds the mere expected utility of consuming and the purchases itself (Tauber, 1972.) Luo (2005) has found that the company has a significant impact on the shopping. On a family shopping trip, the impulsive and hedonic rewards play a smaller role and the decision making is more rational. With low involvement purchases the social value is less significant (Rintamäki, Kanto, Kuusela & Spence, 2006).

## **2.2 Recent temporal shifts**

In the recent years shopping centers have tried to develop into more versatile, fascinating and memorable entities to respond to the quest of experiences surfacing from the consumers. This has meant that there has been a temporal shift in few areas of the industry. The most important seems to be related to entertainment and food (Sit et al., 2003). Also, the role of milieu and atmospherics seems to be changing and growing in importance.

Entertainment was long seen as an add-on rather than significant factor on its own in a shopping center setting. This can be explained by a shift in the role of the entertainment at the shopping center from augmented product to the core product or that the importance of it differs between consumer groups. (Myers et al., 2008). Sit et

al. (2003) propose that entertainment can be divided into two categories that are special event entertainment and specialty entertainment. The most important distinction between these is the duration or span of the operation (Haynes & Talpade, 1996). Special event entertainment is offered on an occasional basis for a short period of time. In contrast, specialty entertainment is bound to the shopping center's property for a longer duration. (Sit et al., 2003.)

The role of food is somehow similar to the entertainment factor. In the history it has not been seen as such an important factor, but it has increased importance in the recent years. Restaurants, cafes and food courts are now being built to almost every new shopping center. (Sit et al., 2003.) They provide a well needed break for the shopping trip (Wakefield & Baker, 1998).

Milieu and atmospherics are critical for the customer's evaluation of quality, customer experience and can also act as an excitement factor (Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman, 1994; Merrilees et al., 2016; Wakefield & Baker, 1998). Five common atmospherics items are *ambiance*, *color*, *décor*, *music* and *layout* (Bell, 1999; Wong et al., 2001). According to Haque & Rahman (2009) the design of the shopping center can help in building recognition and can be an important factor in attracting tenants. Tenants value good opportunities to message to the customer (Myers et al., 2008). A pleasant atmosphere encourages consumers to spend more time at the shopping center (Dennis, Newman, Michon, Brakus & Wright, 2010). The environmental factors are especially important for fashion-oriented consumers (Rahman et al., 2016). Consumers also rely on recall of the last experience in deciding whether to go again and so pleasant experiences best build a strong and regular customer relationship further (Machleit et al., 2000). Since retail has concentrated on chains, it has become difficult to differentiate with merchandise; product, price or promotional activities. Still, the place and the environment can provide opportunities for differentiation. (Bell, 1999.)

### 3 THE STRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF BRAND MEANINGS

This chapter introduces the essential concepts of this study and how these have been researched earlier. First the term brand meaning is introduced in a deeper level and a theoretical model for brand meaning formation is represented. Then the value aspect of shopping is addressed. After this, the concept of place, and how it affects a brand, is discussed. Lastly this chapter gets acquainted on concepts and methods of brand portfolios and brand architecture since shopping centers are identified as multi-brand structures.

#### 3.1 Brand meaning

Brands attach meanings to products and services. Brand meaning itself is still a relatively new concept that has not reached an established and commonly acknowledged definition. Brand meanings have been formerly researched as *attributes* (Davis, 2007; Oakenfull, Blair, Gelb & Dacin, 2000), *associations* (Henderson, Cote, Leong, & Schmitt, 2003; Moore & Homer, 2008), and *brand personality* (Escalas & Bettman 2005; McCracken 1986). Outside the field of marketing and consumer research, meaning has referred to building meaningfulness into a message or experience. Individuals form meanings by mixing received information with their memories, other stimuli present and their own metaphors that come to mind (Zaltman, 2003). Building meanings then makes the world meaningful (Lehtonen, 1998, p. 33).

Brand does not only symbolize the functional attributes attach to it; meaning represents what makes it personally meaningful and fundamentally relevant or valuable for the individual. A brand can have various meanings that might be personal and highly subjective. To be meaningful as a brand in social context, the understanding needs to be evaluated from three different dimensions its *physical construct*, its *functional characteristics* and *characterization* that can also be referred to as the *brand personality*. When talking about *brand personality*, the brand converts into something or someone personal for the consumer, builds a relationship and its specific attributes play a role in the consumer's life. (Aaker, 1994.) It serves a need. *Characterization* serves two purposes. It assists in bringing the brand closer to the consumer but also helps in appealing to a larger audience by building shared awareness of its meanings.

Meanings develop in three environments: the *marketing, individual and social* (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), as well as develop over time (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). Hence, marketing plays a major role in the creation of brand meaning. Advertisements and promotions tend to inject certain beliefs about the brand into the marketplace. However, a brand's meaning is more than just a marketer-induced tactic; it must also be capable of provoking personally relevant components within the individual. (Ligas & Cotte, 1999.)

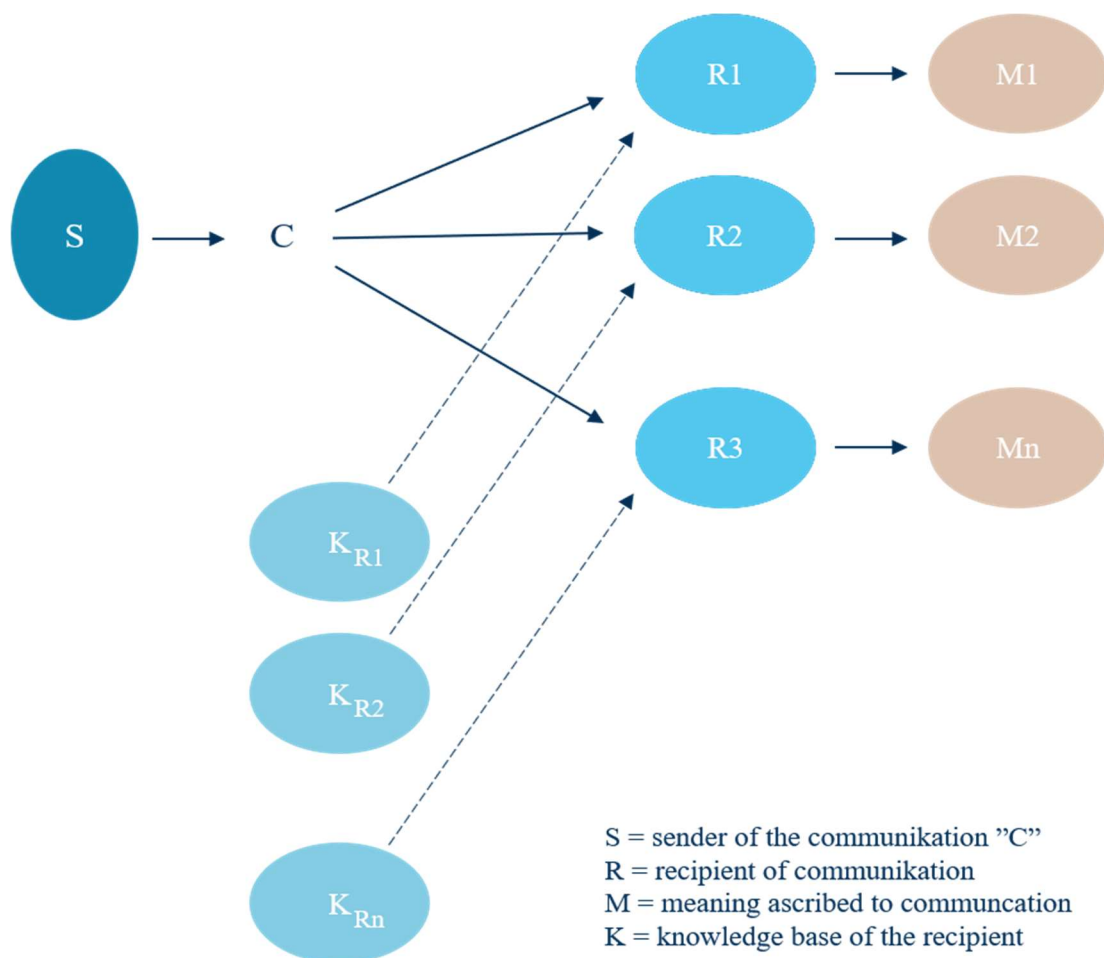
As brand can be considered as a portfolio of meanings built through a series of experiences that are co-created in interactions that consumers and other stakeholders have with different touchpoints, it is not only the consumers that need to be considered regarding brand meaning, but also the many stakeholders that are involved in the interpretation and creation of brand meaning. (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012.) A shopping center can be seen as an example of a business with multiple stakeholders for example the city and the tenants.

Understanding how meaning is constructed is a major interest for managers and academics. Brand management has traditionally relied on physical aspects of brands such as the *product, price, functionality* or *quality* and it has been assumed that brand meaning is managerially determined. (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012.) Shopping centers do not have a single *product, price, functionality* or *quality* which can make the brand more complex to manage and the functional benefits less significant in building a brand. When identified that brand meanings are more co-created and not fully controllable, it is important to research how meanings are formed and how consumers attach meaning in a brand in the unique context of a shopping center.

*Brand knowledge* is closely related to developing meanings. It is defined as all the descriptive and evaluative brand-related information in consumer's memory. Knowledge is the factual and objective essence of what a brand represents and is the source of brand equity. Therefore, knowledge forms a basis for competitive advantage. (Keller, 2003.) On the contrast, brand meaning is the consumer-ascribed value to the knowledge they have acquired. Strong brands form when appropriate brand knowledge structures meet the target audience. More knowledgeable consumers experience higher levels of identification and engagement. (Berthon, Pitt & Campbell, 2009.)



Brands interact in many ways. The two key perspectives on these interactions are those of the consumers and brand owners. Consumers acquire brand knowledge either through direct experience with the brand or through indirect experiences such as exposure to marketing. Every organizational activity can affect *brand knowledge*. Consumers form beliefs about the tangible and intangible features and benefits of a brand and develop feelings and images about it in contact with the brand (Keller, 2003). All this information forms an understanding in consumer's mind and affects how consumers respond to marketing activities. For brand management, the key challenge is to ascertain what specific knowledge is consigned to customer's memory and determine whether common understanding of brand meaning exists. After this, the establishment of mutual understanding of the brand concept occurs. If an understanding is formed, managers can determine that the brand positioning resonates with the customers, driving future brand strategy. (Berthon et al., 2009.)



**Figure 1. Meaning formation: communication, knowledge and meaning (adapted from Berthon et al., 2009, p. 358).**

Figure 1 represents how meanings can form. The meaning is always a product of the communication itself and knowledge base of the recipient. With common communication to different groups, shared meaning (Mn) only occurs if the different recipients share a common knowledge base (Kn). (Berthon et al., 2009.)

As meanings develop in three environments: *individual, social and marketing* (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), the model is further developed as follows in Figure 2.

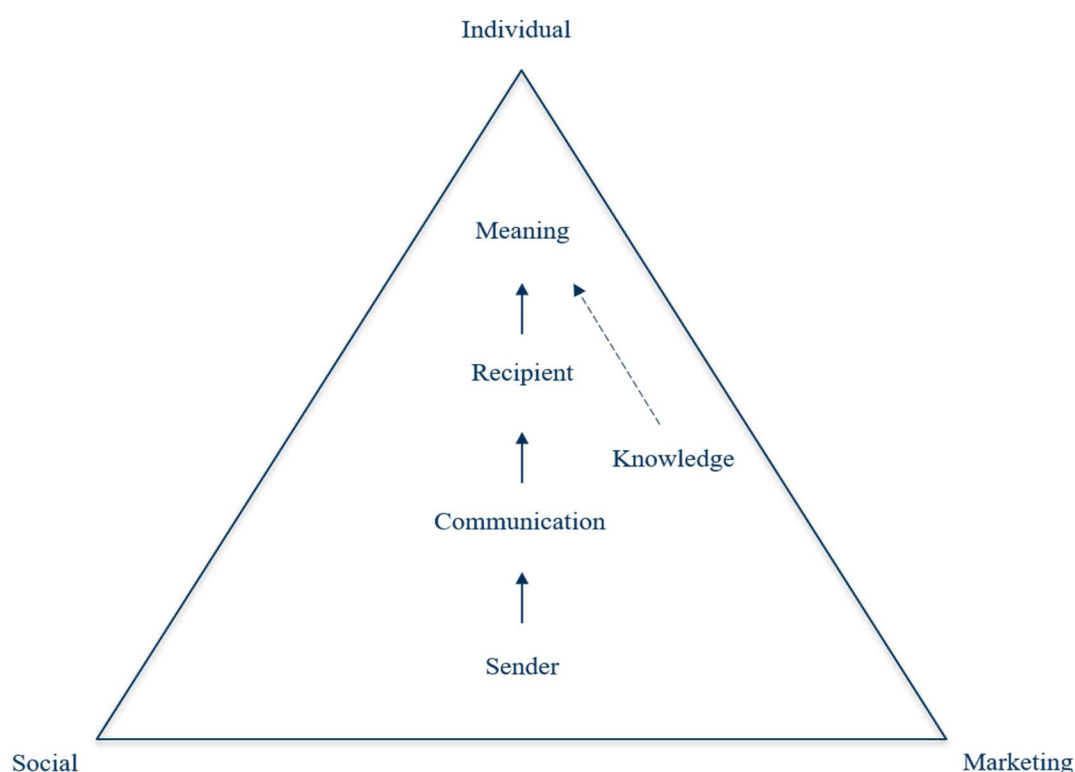


Figure 2. Meaning formation in individual, social and marketing environments.

### 3.2 Consumer needs and value

The goal of marketers to find and satisfy customer needs. Needs are defined as desires that motivate people to behave in a certain way to achieve satisfaction (Maslow, 1943). Traditionally the needs of the consumers have been met with products and brands that provide functional benefits. Over time consumer developed needs linked to particular brands opposed to just products. (Das & Varshneya, 2017; Kotler et al., 2012, pp. 467–472). Brands that can satisfy emerging consumer needs establish as long-lasting and meaningful brand relationships.

The evolution of needs resembles Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs which classifies them from the most essential physiological ones to the most advanced self-actualization needs. At the most basic level, the most essential and primate needs, which are usually considered as the starting point of motivation theory, are so-called physiological needs like hunger and thirst. The next level of needs represents safety needs like need for shelter, health and personal feeling of security. The third level of needs stands for love needs that have been later rephrased into love and belonging needs or social needs. The fourth level of Maslow's needs refer to esteem needs which are defined as needs or desires for a stable, firmly based evaluation of oneself and respect. The highest level of needs self-actualization is characterized by individual's wish to fulfill their potential and contribute to their society for the sake of wanting good, not for the sake of being recognized and merited by the act.

It is important to recognize that consumer needs stem from human needs as the consumer needs are the application of human needs into the consumption process. In the context of this research, this is especially important because shopping centers need to consider all human needs from hunger to self-actualization. For understanding consumer behavior in the brand consumption process, the needs must to be considered. Without a need that a brand satisfies, there is no value in it for the individual and no meanings are formed.

Consumers use the same products in different ways and for different purposes (Holt, 1995; Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991). This is because a product or a service offers multiple features and attributes that provide multiple benefits that can also be referred to as value that is favored in this study. Value is formed when a product or a brand serves a need. As brand meanings are formed by the individual consumers by making connections with past experiences and the current situation with personally meaningful elements, assessing relevance and evaluating how a need is met, it is important to understand what different aspects consumer value consists of.

Shopping value involves an interaction between a consumer and a product or service that consists of not only to the object itself, but also to the consumption experience (Michon, Yu, Smith & Chebat, 2007). Consumer motives for shopping are derived from customer value that has traditionally been divided in two, *utilitarian and hedonic*

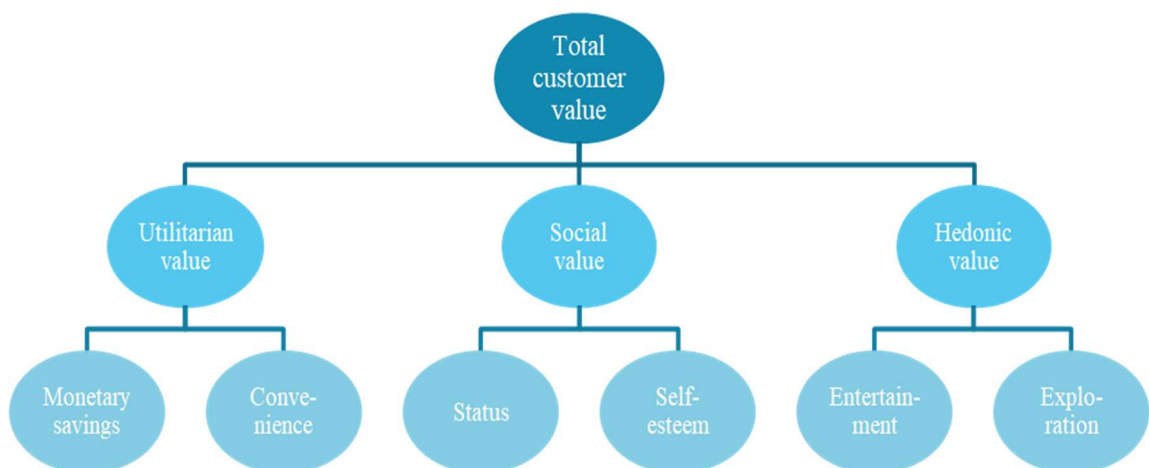
but Rintamäki et. al. (2006) propose that in addition to *utilitarian and hedonic*, there is a third aspect: *social value*.

Utilitarian perspective treats consumers as rational problem-solvers. Consumption is understood as a way to accomplish goals and solve problems. *Utilitarian value* is also instrumental and things like *monetary savings* and *convenience* contribute to it. (Rintamäki et al., 2006.) *Monetary saving* represents reducing the distress from paying and losing money (Chandon, Wansink & Laurent, 2000), thus utilitarian value can be increased by discounts and reasonable prices so that consumers can feel that they get good value for their money and have made a reasonable purchase. *Convenience* can be defined as the ratio of inputs and outputs of a shopping trip. Saving time and effort are the relevant inputs and by reducing those, the convenience is increased. But as the experienced effort and value of the output, convenience is subjective and affected by expectations. To enhance convenience, the customers and the whole retail experience need to be understood to find ways to maximize the speed and ease. (Rintamäki et al., 2006.) Convenience can be further divided to *access*, *search*, *possession* and *transaction convenience* (Seiders, Berry & Gresham, 2000). Nonetheless, shopping centers are considered as places where people also enjoy their time and satisfy their recreational and social needs rather than simply fulfilling their functional needs (Das & Varshneya, 2017).

A hedonic perspective is also present and can contribute to the shopping experience. The hedonic aspects of consumption are highlighted by three F's – *fantasies*, *feelings* and *fun* (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In the experience economy, consumers want to sense, feel, think, act and relate (Muthiah & Suja, 2017). The *hedonic value* is realized when the act of shopping is a goal of its own unattached to the actual purchases and instrumental value through the goods (Michon & Chebat, 2004; Rintamäki et al., 2006). It is self-oriented and self-purposeful. Some people just go to the shopping center for relaxation without having an intention to purchase and this poses a challenge for the atmospherics to act attractive (Das & Varshneya, 2017). *Hedonic value* is more abstract and highly subjective. *Entertainment* and *exploration* are considered to contribute to hedonic value. In the recent years *entertainment* has literally been brought to retail environments and especially in shopping centers in the form of movie theaters, for example. Aesthetics is also a part of the experience. From a hedonic

perspective, shopping is an adventure creating enjoyment from activities like browsing and variety seeking. (Rintamäki et al., 2006.) Michon et al. (2007) and Michon, Chebat, Yu and Lemarié (2015) note that utilitarian and hedonic shopping values are not opposed but can complement each other

The social dimension of shopping views it as a social act where symbolic meanings, social codes, relationships and the consumer's identity and self can be produced and reproduced (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). Consumers express their values through shopping (Michon & Chebat, 2004). The choice of a shopping environment thus represents how the customer wants to be seen or how one wants to see oneself. So, the act of shopping can produce a symbolic benefit as a means of expressing one's personal values through consumption. *Status* enhancement is attained by using symbolic features in communicating signs of position or membership to others. *Self-esteem* enhancement is a benefit experienced when symbolic features derived from shopping in certain stores or products and other customers are attached to self to define and maintain one's concept of self. Symbolic properties can also be used to emphasize unique traits. Shopping and consumption can be a social experience. (Rintamäki et al., 2006.) Brands are one of the most significant signs consumers use in different forms in everyday life to construct identities and communicate self-concepts, whether it is intentional or not.



**Figure 3. The structural model of total customer value (adapted from Rintamäki et al., 2006, p. 13).**

### 3.3 Place branding

Consumers develop a sense of place by overarching impressions encompassing the general ways in which people feel about places, sense it and assign concepts and values to it, in other words, attach meanings to it. Therefore, the place cannot be ignored as an important factor in constructing meanings for a shopping center brand. The sense of place is formed by the physical and social factor. (Najafi & Mina, 2011.) These can be induced and stimulated in different ways such as developing the spatial forms, and on the other hand, by enabling active participation in the space by organizing events, for example. (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015.)

Different spaces as enablers have been recognized in their role in building a sense of community (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood & Knuiman, 2012; Wu & Lo, 2018). Private space with open access to majority of people can be referred to as a “quasi-public” or “hybrid” space (Button, 2003). Shopping centers are an excellent example of this, and they are also favored by the local residents as important social spaces. (Mantey, 2017; Pyyry, 2016). People tend to choose a shopping center in line with their own socio-economic status. A higher mixing of people from different backgrounds positively contributes to the process of choosing a shopping center. (Beiró, 2018.)

The relationship between people and a place is transactional in nature and has several intentionality levels. According to Shamai (1991) there are several scales of intentionality, from no sense of place or placeless, knowledge of being located in the place, belonging to a place, attachment to a place, identification with the place’s goal, involvement in a place, and up to sacrifice for a place.

Place branding is about influencing perceptions of a place. Literature has identified that the challenges related to place branding lie in the complexity of a place as a branded entity, the lack of control and multiplicity of stakeholder groups and their conflicting interest. (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015.)

Despite being a physical entity, shopping centers are actually branding something that is intangible: the environment. Since shopping centers do not have a product of their own, they should have their name associated with name-brand tenants. If the products

or the tenants are similar to others, it is important in terms of branding to differentiate with presentation. It is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate with product, price or promotional activities but the place or a store provide an opportunity for differentiation (Bell, 1999). Design is also an instrument of branding. It can contribute to the shopping center experience but also the tenants. Building design should present opportunities to message to the customer. (Haque & Rahman, 2009.)

Places can provide instant associations for a corporate brand (Kapferer, 2012, p. 195). Places can build powerful emotional or self-expressive associations and content that can be linked to the corporate brand and support the emotional dimension of corporate reputation (Uggla, 2006).

The need for retailer co-operation is a primary concern in managing a retail area's image. Effectively, the image of a shopping area is a public good, where the success of each store is somehow dependent upon the image of the whole region. There may be no clear incentive for an individual store to improve its own image without the assurance that other stores will do likewise. (Bell, 1999.)

Large retail developments like shopping centers are regarded as flagship projects for the towns and cities they are located in. Flagships are significant, high-profile and prestigious land and property developments which play an influential and catalytic role in urban regeneration. Such a development is a marketing tool for an area or a city. Anchor tenants could in turn be thought as the flagships for the center itself. (Warnaby & Bennison, 2006.)

### **3.4 Brand portfolio**

As brand meanings form in a *marketing* induced environment in addition to an *individual* and a *social* environment, the process and the meanings can be influenced with marketing activities up to a certain point. It must be remembered that a large proportion of them is also co-created with the consumer and so more uncontrollable. One fundamental aspect relating to how consumers see brands, and one that a marketer can determine, is the offer of brands and their relationship to each other. This is more commonly referred to as the brand portfolio and brand architecture.

Brand architecture is a concept that has evolved from conventional branding. It describes a process of managing and designing a portfolio of brands to achieve efficacy, clarity and value. (Dooley & Bowie, 2005.) Brand portfolio is a structure managed through brand architecture that defines roles of different brands and the nature of the relationships between brands. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) present the brand relationship spectrum for managing a brand portfolio to address conflicting brand strategy needs, allowing brands to stretch across products and markets, leveraging brand equity, protect the brands and help in signaling new and different. The brand relationship spectrum identifies four different brand architecture strategies that are *house of brands*, *endorsed brands*, *sub-brands* and *branded house*.

*The house of brands* strategy involves independent stand-alone brands. House of brands gives up on the opportunity to leverage brand across multiple businesses. On the other hand, it allows the clear positioning of brands on functional benefits and to dominate niche segments. House of brands requires less compromises between brands to ensure overall fit in relation of other brands within the portfolio. Brand associations incompatible with offering are better avoided. Especially this comes across regarding possible new offerings. Naming a product is less restricted and the name can reflect different functional benefits better. Unconnected brands conflict each other less when operating in the same markets. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000.)

Shadow endorser is a subcategory of the house of brands strategy. The shadow endorser brand is not visibly connected to the endorsed brand, but many people realize that these brands are linked to each other. Shadow endorser leverages the advantages of having a well-known organization backing the brand. As the endorser can have a positive effect on the endorsed brand, likewise the effect can also be negative. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000.)

*Endorsed brands* are independent but visibly connected and endorsed by another brand, usually an organizational brand. This provides credibility and substance to the offering. Endorsing brand can act as a guarantee for the brand promise although these do not have to fit closely together, in other words, have the same brand promise.



Endorsed brands strategy calls for understanding of the differences between corporate and product brands. Creating an organizational brand to endorse the product brands requires resources for the management of this brand. The endorsing brand can also provide useful associations for the endorser in newly acquired product categories, for example. The endorsement can also be indicated by a visual element (token endorser) or in the name (linked name). (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000.)

*Sub-brands* are connected to a master brand and shape the associations of that. One common role for sub-brands is to help in extending the master brand to a new segment. Sub-brands are more closely linked to each other than endorsed brands and are no longer independent. As the link between brands is strong with sub-brands, the associations are also more likely to be affected by each other. This can be seen as a risk and as an opportunity. The master brand is major driver in the sub-brands strategy. If there are multiple significant brands in one structure, this can be considered as a co-driver situation. Comparable quality is important in these kinds of situations or the more prestigious brand will likely be affected negatively in terms of it. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000.)

*The branded house* strategy allows the master brand to become the dominant driver across multiple offerings. This can also be called umbrella branding (Dooley & Bowie, 2005; Erdem, 1998). The branded house and umbrella brand strategy enhance clarity, synergy and leverage which are undeniable benefits but in turn can affect the ability to target specific customer segments. The value proposition follows the master brand and is easily transferred. A single brand is easier to understand and built name recall on. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000.)

Muzellec & Lambkin (2009) recognize two types of branding strategies within a brand portfolio which are *integration* and *separation*. Within the *integration* strategy, ascending brand extension is where the product brand image is used to improve the visibility of the corporate brand and descending brand extension utilizes the corporate brand in enhancing the credibility of a product brand. *Separation* strategy aims in driving apart and differentiating the brands. The master brand has different kind of role in these two strategies.

Shopping centers have traditionally utilized the house of brands architecture and the brands within the shopping center are usually owned by different organizations. However, the strategy has been more of an ascending brand extension rather than separation. No research has been done on how shopping centers could further leverage the endorsement of other brands and vice versa although the significance of anchor tenants on shopping center brand image has been identified. (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 191; Warnaby & Bennison, 2006.). As the shopping center branding has still received little attention, (Dennis et al., 2002; Haque & Rahman, 2009; Merrilees et al., 2016), it seems that the significance of it and the benefits have been left unnoticed and the tenant brands have been relied in ensuring the visibility. In order for the shopping center brand becoming the master brand, rather than only being endorsed by the tenants' brands, fit must be considered more closely. Building a more tighter brand architecture increases dilution and the effects that the brands can have on each other. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000.) The literature on co-branding emphasizes the importance of compatibility between cobranding participants (Leuthesser, Kohli & Suri, 2003; Warnaby & Bennison, 2006).

### **3.5 Synthesis of the theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is composed of two parts. The first part addressed the general formation of brand meanings in individual, social and marketing environments through communication and knowledge (see Figure 2). The second part considers the special characteristics of the shopping center brand (see Figure 4).

Previous literature highlights three aspects that affect the shopping center brand. These are the place and the place brand, customer value derived from hedonic, utilitarian and social aspects and the brand portfolio as shopping centers are multi-brand structures. The customer value is based on the needs of the individual. When a need is filled, value emerges. Brand meanings are tightly affected by all of these and vice versa. Brand meanings are formed when something personally meaningful is attached to a brand by mixing received information with previous experience and other stimuli present. Meanings are subjective like metaphors. Shared meanings occur when recipients share a common knowledge base.

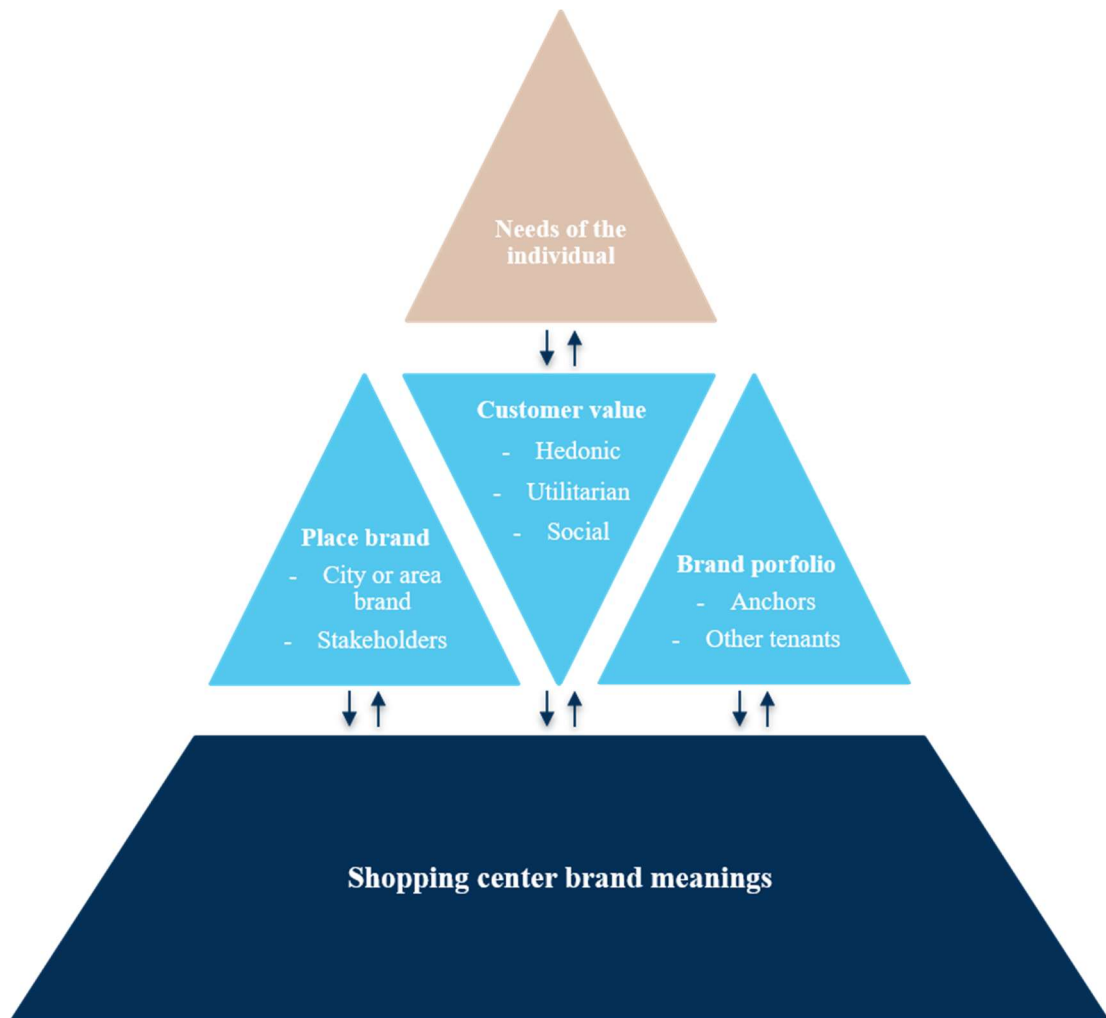


Figure 4. Theoretical model of the formation of shopping center brand meanings.

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents the research strategy and methodological choices of this study as well as the reasoning behind them. The subject of the case study is introduced. Furthermore, the gathering and analysis of the empirical data is familiarized with.

### **4.1 Qualitative research**

The purpose of this research, to build comprehensive understanding of the meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand and how meanings are formed, supported the choice of a qualitative research method. Qualitative methods pursue further profound and comprehensive understanding about the phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Qualitative methods are also recognized for allowing the study of brand image, especially to identify benefits or associated attributes (Dolnicar & Grün, 2007).

This study utilizes an abductive approach to producing knowledge. Abductive reasoning refers to the process of moving between theory and empiricism in a conversational way. This means moving from the everyday descriptions and meanings given by people, to categories and concepts that create the basis for the understanding or explanation to the phenomenon. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) Abduction allows the use of both, induction and deduction in different phases of the study. This fits into a research process that is not completely theoretically or empirically oriented but aims on developing theory based on the empirical findings, such as this study (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010, p. 102).

### **4.2 Case study**

The strength of the case study research approach is in its ability to encompass complex business issues in an accessible, vivid, personal and pragmatic way (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) and Hamel, Dufour and Fortin (1993) case study research should be seen more as a research approach or strategy than a research method since the case study itself can utilize several research methods.

An instrumental case study aims on gaining wider understanding through a case (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2005, p. 9). A distinction needs to be made between an intensive and extensive case study. An intensive research study, also called a classic case study, focuses on finding out as much as possible about one case or few at the most. The extensive design is useful in mapping patterns and properties always among several cases. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.)

The main purpose of an intensive case research study is to explore the case from the inside. Generalizability can be seen as the weakness or a challenge in case studies and the approach has been sometimes critiqued for producing descriptions rather than precise scientific knowledge. Even so, this does not mean that understanding gained from a case study could not be theoretically informed or could not be used to elaborate theory. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) Dyer and Wilkins (1991) actually suggest the contrary. An instrumental case study uses a particular case to bring broader comprehension of an issue or a phenomenon (Stake, 1995, p. 3).

The choice of subject of the research, the selection of the case, needs to be done considering the purpose and objectives of it and the most important thing is to consider what can be learned from it (Patton, 1990, p. 184). It is essential to also take in account the available time and resources (Stake, 1995, p. 51).

This is an instrumental, intensive and explanatory case study because it has an instrumental purpose in gaining understanding about what kind of meanings consumers attach to shopping center brands and how these are formed. This study focuses on learning from one typical case of shopping centers to support this goal. The case itself is not intrinsic or particularly special. This study aims on explaining why certain meanings are attached to a shopping center brand. The chosen research strategy fits to the complex issue and explaining the mechanisms behind it considering that the subject has not yet been researched extensively and the theory still needs to be developed. (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2005, pp. 9–17; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, pp. 146–147.) The choice of approach, method and case was done in respect of the available time and resources with respect to the objectives and extent of this paper.

A distinctive characteristic of any qualitative inquiry is its emphasis on interpretation. Although there is interpretation in all research, the main purpose of intensive case studies is to offer interpretations on the case made by the researcher, and sometimes by the business actors involved in the study. Accordingly, the business researcher is an interpreter who both constructs the case and analyses it, focusing on the perspectives, conceptions, experiences, interactions and sense-making processes of the people involved in the study. In this case the subject of the case study is already familiar to the researcher from brief prior experience in working with the brand. A study that is done in an organization or business that is already familiar to the researcher can be called backyard research. Also, the research is conducted for the means of future management of the shopping center and its brand. Therefore, the existing preconceptions cannot be excluded from the research setting but on the other hand enable a unique access to the data and the case study from the inside and allows developing contextual knowledge which is key to qualitative research. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.)

### **4.3 Subject of the case study**

The subject of this case study is the shopping center x. It is a shopping center located in a large city in Finland. The shopping center is a traditional, medium size shopping center located in the city center like most of the Finnish shopping centers are (Finnish Council of Shopping Centers, 2019; International Council of Shopping Centers, 2020). It can be seen as a typical example of a Finnish shopping center. In 2019, there were 7 million visitors and total sales of 100 million euros. A supermarket and a department store act as anchor tenants of the shopping center and in addition there are 57 other tenants. The assortment is wide with fashion, home interior, electronics and restaurants. There are also few offices located in the shopping center. The shopping center is fully owned by a single local company.

### **4.4 Analysis method**

*“A picture is worth a thousand words”*

*– a common saying by unknown*

In the quest to wholly understand consumers and how they build meaningfulness in their minds, it is essential to acknowledge how people construct understanding about the surrounding world, consider it and how they represent their thoughts. People do not only communicate on a verbal level and so it would be important to also enable non-verbal communication in a research setting to ensure the gathering of all the information available. Projective research methods allow a more all-encompassing expression of oneself. This enables surfacing deep and gathering sophisticated consumer insight. (Mulvey & Kavalam, 2010.) Therefore, projective methods are considered as an excellent fit to this research as the purpose is to build profound understanding about shopping center brand meanings and as it is recognized that brands even have subconscious aspects to them that need be expressed to be research (Kotler et al., 2012, p. 469).

The method chosen for this research is the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique further referred to as ZMET. The method was developed by Gerald Zaltman in the 1990's to better fit the needs emerging from marketing research but the development drew from several fields and disciplines (Catchings-Castello, 2000; Zaltman, 1996). Since then it has gathered popularity among the projective methods and has been discovered effective (Sugai, 2005). The ZMET-method allows drawing from associations and revealing the most important aspects. This can help in understanding perceived personal relevance of a brand and the customer's perspective on it. (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Mulvey & Kavalam, 2010.) Therefore, it fits well with creative and qualitative marketing efforts and especially brand image research (Durgee & Chen, 2006; Hofstede, van Hoof, Walenberg, & de Jong, 2007).

People form cognitive structures or mental models when they acquire knowledge, and these represent the interpreted meanings of a brand. These are wider representations of consumers perceptions. (Sugai, 2005.) This research applies the term *mental model* as it is all-encompassing. Cognitive structure refers to all representations being cognitions, in other words beliefs. The broader term *mental model* acknowledges that there can be other representations as well, such as attitudes, emotions, and feelings, symbols, personal values, memories and sensory experiences. (Christensen & Olson, 2002.)

According to Zaltman (1997) *mental models* are composed of images and Christensen and Olson (2002) suggest thoughts are more image-based than word-based. Language is more of a tool that humans try to convey their thoughts to others with. Therefore, mental models can be thought to be made of images as well. Much of the content of mental models is unconscious or tacit (Christensen & Olson, 2002). Many human reactions like emotions occur without awareness.

Metaphors are a key concept of mental models (Catchings-Castello, 2000). They evoke and help in expressing nonverbal imaginary. Metaphors often represent something beyond the words and language used. They represent the inner mental models but can also act as a means of creating and communicating shared understanding. This involves experiencing one thing in terms of another. (Zaltman, 1997.)

In the ZMET-method, pictures are used to help and provide a natural and efficient technique for communication. Participants of the interviews can collect their own pictures. (Catchings-Castello, 2000.) ZMET utilizes images in accessing metaphors of consumers and applies these to understand the structure and content of consumers' mental models (Sugai, 2005). It is a hybrid method that uses modified versions of the Kelly Repertory Grid and laddering techniques (Mulvey & Kavalam, 2010). The Kelly Grid technique is a process of identifying how any two of three stimuli are similar, but different from the third stimulus (Catchings-Castello, 2000). Laddering is a method of in-depth interviews, designed to understand the deeper basis of consumer decisions by attending to various consequences of choice and producing a hierarchical value map. This can link product attributes and functional benefits to an important personal value. (Christensen & Olson, 2002.) The ZMET-method is seen to fit the objectives of this research excellently.

#### **4.5 Data collection**

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) accessibility and qualification are essential in selecting participants for qualitative study. The participants for this study were gathered by approaching 1461 people by email to invite them to participate to the study. 978 of these were gathered as a random sample from 33 000 people that had made purchases in either or both of the two biggest anchor stores of the shopping



center, a department store and a supermarket, within a year and lived in the same city as the shopping center is located in. The data was gathered through a loyalty card program. An invite was also sent to 483 people that had subscribed to the shopping center's newsletter to acquire people also outside the loyalty program. The invites were sent in these two ways to get a diverse sample with an emphasis on the main clientele and focus group of the shopping center. Some people were not able to be excluded from these two samples. In a brand study, it is important that the respondents have some previous experience with interacting the brand (Dolnicar & Grün, 2007). This was ensured by choosing people that had visited the shopping center at least twice within a year and by inviting people that had previously expressed interest in it by subscribing a newsletter. In the email invite the subject of the research was announced.

In a form the volunteers were asked to fill out, they were asked about their age, gender, place of residence, the frequency they approximately visit the shopping center, whether they have kids, their occupation and whether they have a car. Also, the contact information was gathered in order to organize the interviews. Out of the total 37 volunteers signed as interest in participating in the interviews, eight were chosen with the intention to get as diversified of a sample as possible in order to get different views on the subject. A sample of seven to eight participants was regarded to likely be enough for sufficient amount of data, regarding the research objectives and feasible in terms of the available resources and with respect to the extent of this thesis. In order to have a diversified sample, people from both genders and all age groups were chosen in addition to people that visit the shopping center frequently and less frequently and have and do not have kids and a car at their use. Two out of these eight cancelled their interview. The selected date that was announced in the invite and the available times can also have affected the signing up and the sample, as the organization of the interviews had to be made convenient. A gift card worth of 50 € was given to the participants of the interviews.

In total, seven one-on-one interviews were conducted as a part of this research. One of these was a pilot interview done in February 2020 and this responded was recruited from the researchers own network but fit the criteria by living in the same city and being familiar to the shopping center. The rest of the six interviews were conducted in March 2020 within a period of one day because of time related issues. According to

Zaltman (1997) data gathered from four or five interviews can be enough to produce adequate knowledge for the needs of a study. The sample was grown to seven interviews to increase reliability. The duration of the interviews ranged from 37 minutes up to 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded, the interviewer took notes and the interviews were transcribed within 3 weeks. The interviews were anonymized to ensure privacy and the audio-recordings destroyed after transcribing.

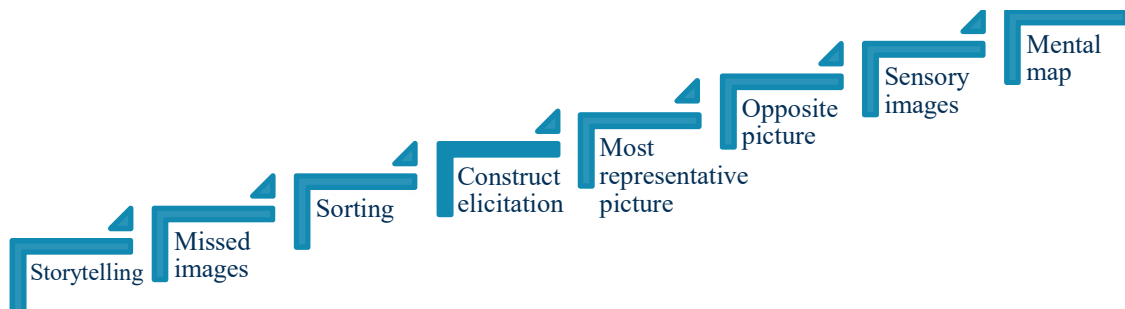
**Table 1. Participants of the study.**

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Visiting the shopping center	Children in the household	A car in the household	Location	Duration
A	female	25	law secretary	At least once a week	No	No	Shopping center meeting room	37 min
B	female	35	special researcher	1-3 times a month	Yes	Yes	Shopping center meeting room	44 min
C	male	36	unemployed	2-4 times a year	Yes	Yes	Shopping center meeting room	40 min
D	female	61	practical nurse	At least once a week	No	No	Shopping center meeting room	37 min
E	male	52	process expert	At least once a week	Yes	Yes	Shopping center meeting room	50 min
F	male	31	jewellery craftsman	5-10 times a year	No	No	Shopping center meeting room	49 min
G	female	25	marketing assistant	At least once a week	No	No	A coffee shop	47 min

All the participants were contacted with the decision to include them to the research a week prior to the actual interview. At the same time, they were given instructions on how to prepare for the interview. The interviewees were asked to gather 7-10 pictures that best described shopping center x and their mental images and meanings for it with a manner of their choice (e.g. magazines and the internet) and to bring these to the

interview. According to Zaltman (1997) seven days is enough time for the participants to find meaningful stimuli. The participants gathered the pictures themselves to get richer data and increase likelihood that essential but previously uncovered issues would be uncovered. Allowing enough time for preparing, the pool of mental models and constructs, to be surfaced in the interview, expands. The processing is likely to be mainly unconscious but the meanings that result can become explicit during the interview. In the invitation sent by email the interviewees were given the opportunity to ask further question by replying but no one took this opportunity. The participants found the task quite easy, but some mentioned struggling with finding enough pictures and not resulting in photos from a commercial origin as instructed.

The in-depth interviews followed the steps of the ZMET-method as defined by Zaltman and Coulter (1995) (Also Catchings-Castello, 2000; Zaltman, 1997). According to Catchings-Castello (2000) the steps could be modified to fit a certain research project. In this study, all eight steps were applied as they all were found useful in the pilot interview.



**Figure 5. The steps of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique method “ZMET” by Zaltman and Coulter (1995).**

With the first step, *storytelling*, the participants were asked to tell the stories behind the pictures they had chosen, to describe them and their content in their own words.

In the second step, *missed images*, the participants were asked whether they found all the pictures they were looking for or if they had looked for a particular kind of picture but were unable to find it.

In the third step, *sorting*, the participants were asked to sort the pictures into meaningful groups and remove duplicates.

The fourth step, *construct elicitation*, uses modified versions of Kelly Repertory Grid and laddering techniques for eliciting constructs with underlying thinking and action. The interviewer identified any two of three pictures that are similar but different from the third one to elicit constructs. This allows the participants to surface how they make sense of the pictures or sort them out and the meanings they have been given in their minds. The similarities and differences were pointed out and discussed until no new constructs surfaced.

In the fifth step, *most representative picture*, the participants were asked to pick and describe the most representative picture and the *opposite picture* in the sixth step.

In the seventh step, *sensory images*, the participants described the taste, touch, smell, color, sound and emotions the brand in question awoke in them.

In the last stage, the eighth step, *mental map*, the participants arranged the pictures into a mental map that best described their perceptions about the subject.

The outline for the interview is presented in English in Appendix 1 and in Finnish in Appendix 2. Overall, this method chosen served the research purpose and was able to provide rich and diverse insights to the research questions as it included meanings expressed both verbally and nonverbally.

#### **4.6 Data analysis**

In qualitative research data generation, at least some of the analysis and interpretation happen at the same time (Gummesson, 2005). This was also true for this study as the analysis already started in the form of taking notes during the interviews and transcribing. The actual analysis started after the transcription process. In this research, all the interviews were conducted in Finnish as it was the first language of the interviewer and all the interviewees and the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed word-to-word to include the whole dialogue. In the empirical analysis, the

citations of the transcribed material in are used in English to thematize the data and to make empirical conclusions (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, p. 138). In the analysis, a semiotic method was utilized. The semiotic analysis takes in account the hidden meanings and so fits the ZMET-method which aims on revealing often unconscious mental models. (Catchings-Castello, 2000; Zaltman, 1996).

The aim of the analysis was to find constructs of brand meanings and their combinations relevant to the study. First the transcriptions of interviews were read through and familiarized with the pictures and notes. The exact analysis started with color coding the initial meanings narrated behind the pictures and the groups these were sorted to. The coding was done twice to ensure precision and consistency and that nothing was accidentally left out. The value of each construct was also analyzed through missed images, the most and least representative picture and the dialogue. The mental map the participants were asked to form in the interviews also represented the relations of these meanings. When no new constructs appeared, the constructs identified from different interviews were brought together to find connections and combinations across interviews and to enable analysis of relevance in general. Similar constructs of meanings were sorted to appropriate entities and these were named descriptively. Dividing and picking out relevant themes from the empirical data helps the researcher to evaluate the different subjects in each interview that are relevant for this research problem (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

In the end, all the mental maps and constructs were combined into a collective figure which represents the most important constructs emerged from the data that were addressed by most of the participants. This research identified eight central themes of constructs and 23 sub-constructs of meanings.

## 5 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter the collective mental map of meanings consumer attach to a shopping center brand is introduced and the themes it includes are discussed closely. After this, the findings on how the meanings are formed are presented. Finally, these findings are summarized and evaluated. Most importantly, it was perceived that consumers attach diverse meanings to shopping centers, and several were identified from each individual interview.

### 5.1 Meanings for a shopping center brand

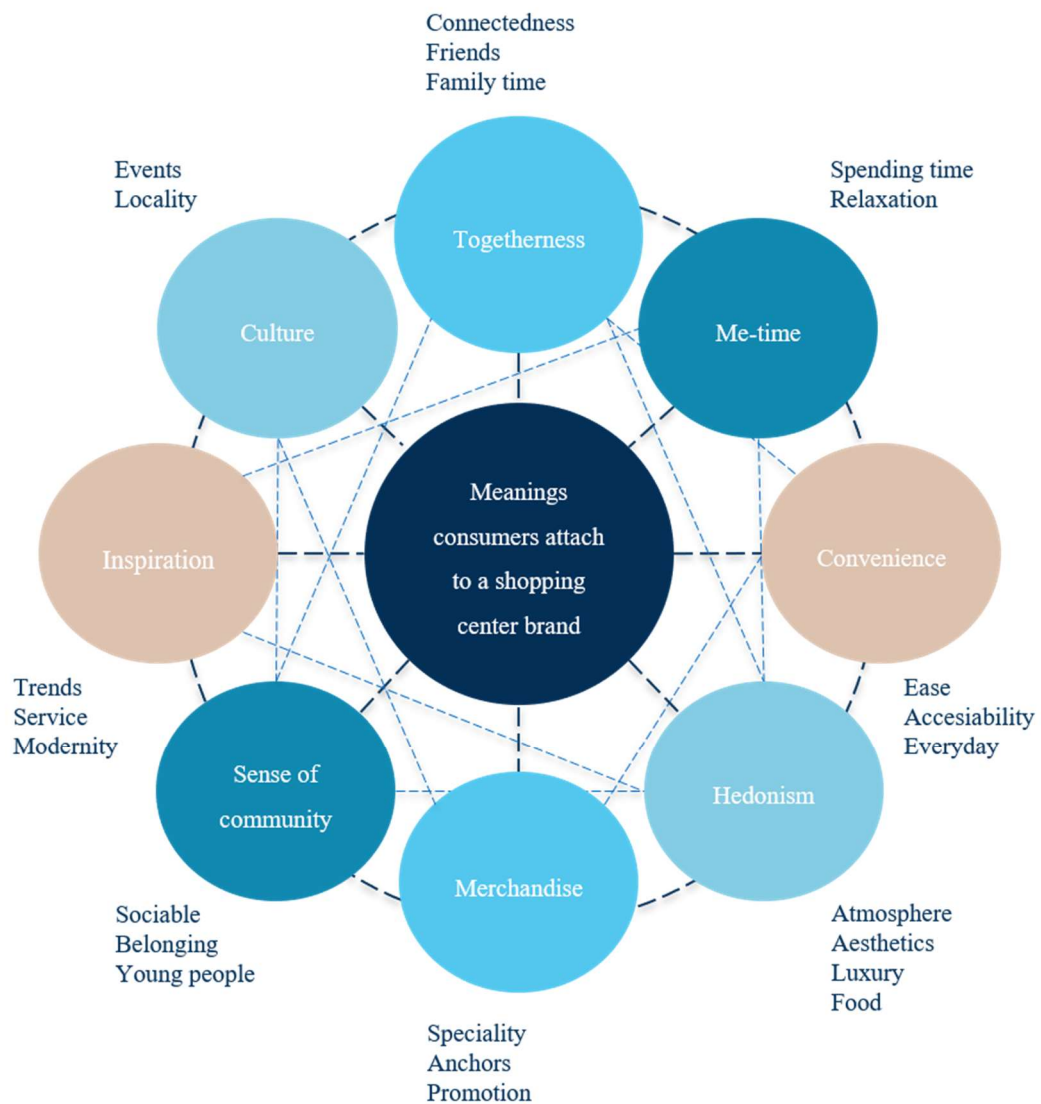


Figure 6. The map of meanings consumers attach to the shopping center brand.

The map (Figure 6) reveals eight central themes and collective constructs that are *togetherness, me-time, convenience, hedonism, merchandise, sense of community, inspiration* and *culture*. Each of these themes contains two to four sub-themes that go into more detail and represent the thematic scope. The map includes meanings that were addressed by most of the interviewees.

The lines between the themes represent the connections between them. Some themes are very close related to each other like togetherness and sense of community and some can also be seen somewhat opposite to one another such as convenience and hedonism. Next, all the themes are addressed separately and a table of each central theme and its sub-themes, that represent the scope, are presented.

#### 5.1.1 *Togetherness*

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) state that shopping centers are attractive locations which facilitate social interactions and entertainment. All participants described in words and with pictures they had chosen that a shopping center is a place where you can spend time together. For many it was also a place where you meet people intentionally but also unintentionally.

“The first thing that came to my mind was this meeting place” – F

“It is that kind of a place where you often ran into people you know out of the blue and at the same time chat quickly about how you have been or just say hello. So, it is nice that it is such a center where you often meet people you do not see so often and also this reflects a meeting place. It is often the place where we agree to meet up with my friends” – G

A shopping center is an easy place to meet up in since their location is known by many and you do not need to explain it every time with going into detail. Most shopping centers traditionally have common areas such as atriums that serve as a focal point, as also noted by Kusumowidagdo et al., (2015). These offer shelter from the weather and this is why it was considered as better than meeting somewhere in the streets outdoors.

“It is an easy place to meet as it is so central that everybody knows where to go, you do not need to tell them that you should drive that way or walk this way. We used to meet outside but now everybody just meets in the shopping center” – E

Shopping and consumption are social experiences (Rintamäki et al., 2006). The shopping experience, motivation and goals which are pursued with it can vary significantly with who are you together with. Luo (2005) has found that the company has a significant impact on the shopping. On a family shopping trip, the impulsive and hedonic rewards play a smaller role and the decision making is more rational.

“Well maybe it depends on which group you are with or so. The picture of a family or whatever. On the other hand, the coffee shop by the street represents this stagnation and so you need to be with a totally different group. So, it depends on whether I am with friends or family.” – B

In addition to meeting friends, the shopping center was regarded as a great place for families. This was also mentioned by participants that did not have children themselves or had never visited the shopping center with children.

“I see that a shopping center is a good place for families to spend time. Going out to eat and shopping for example, spending time with family.” – G

“We do not go elsewhere, or I mean we would not go circling around the streets to go to a store, but we come here, and we make a strike and then leave, and it is very easy with the child. It is a family experience. You can come as a family.” – B

“I do think that families with children are a central part” – A

The children played a role as an essential decision maker as well.

“We always go where the children want to go. It is an experience for them, I would say.” – E

The families appreciated the additional services and amenities a shopping center can offer more highly than others. Services are important as they represent the augmented product that supports the core product, the merchandising and add value to the whole shopping experience (Mittal & Jhamb, 2016). In addition to personal service, shopping centers offer communal services such as escalators, lifts and guidance as well as



amenities like restrooms and family rooms. This is a way to make the shopping experience more pleasurable and increasing time spent (Michon et al., 2007).

“The elevators, diaper changing room and the space where kids can play really support the decision to go with kids.” – B

The food courts, that have not yet become common in Finland, were praised for social opportunities with common space as well as being effortless. Restaurants and cafes are the most common places for social interactions as they are more peaceful. Having a meal is one of the most important common activities in shopping centers.

“These food courts that you often see, and I have tried abroad, there you have everything in the same space and can easily check what is there on the offer and what would you like to have and having space opposed to going around trying to figure these out.” – B

“There was this communal space with many restaurants where the restaurants would go around the room and, in the middle, there were shared sets of dishes. So, it was easy to choose for yourself and there were no individual compartments for everyone. Then you can come with your friends and all decide what you want to have but can go and eat at the same table. There are choices and it is communal.” – F

**Table 2. The thematic orientation of togetherness.**

Togetherness		
Connectedness	Friends	Family time

### 5.1.2 *Me-time*

In addition to spending time together, a shopping center can be a place to have time for yourself. With treating yourself and self-gratification, the process of buying and going to the shopping center become motivating on their own rather than only the expected utility of consuming and the purchase itself (Tauber, 1972). This was well visible in this study as well. A shopping center is a place to spend time outside your home in a meaningful way.

“To spend time, I can go there and see what I can find and sometimes if I am bored, for example, and have nothing to do, then I think I could go down and walk around and spend time” – G

Some avoidance behaviors also surfaced in the interviews and not everyone wanted to spend excess time in retail environments. Still, more approach behavior was showcased and the process of buying, exploration and the process itself was meaningful to many on its own (Rahman et al., 2016). Although making a trip to a shopping center can be a merely a compulsory thing to do occasionally, for some it can also be a way to relax (Das & Varshneya, 2017).

“This is the most representative picture, of course, when I get to relax and enjoy like if I go for a cup of coffee by myself and there is fuss around, but I am in my own bubble” – D

**Table 3. The thematic orientation of me-time.**

Me-time	
Spending time	Relaxation

### 5.1.3 Convenience

Nearly all the participants in the study brought up that a shopping center is a sensible choice for a certain situation. A significant amount of the decision making to go to a shopping center seemed to be rational and based utilitarian value of convenience like saving time or reducing effort (Rintamäki et al., 2006). In order to increase patronage, a shopping center should be easily accessible and to minimize the search times and psychological costs of customers like stress and frustration (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 186).

“Well, it just that it is absolutely easy to come, and it has formed to be a familiar and safe choice.” – F

“It is easy to come here.” – E

The overall feel of ease in the shopping trip was tightly connected to accessibility. Accessibility describes the ease of getting in and out of a shopping center (Levy &

Weitz, 2006, p. 213). It can be further divided into macro and micro levels. Both of these were found behind the meanings participants expressed. Macro-accessibility concerns road conditions and the proximity of the center from the customer's home or workplace. (Sit et al., 2003.) The distance is often a key factor in making a decision on which shopping center to visit (Beiró, 2018).

“Well, it is an easy place. It is so close that I do not see a reason why I would go somewhere further away if I can get the things up close.” – G

Micro-accessibility on the other hand refers to parking facilities, for example, and the ease of navigation within the shopping center (Sit et al., 2003). As already mentioned, the ease of micro-accessibility was highly appreciated by families in particular.

“The ease of coming that I go by car, I do not take the public transport and I can drive to the parking garage and I think it is very nice that then I can just take the elevator up. No matter what the weather, I do not need to walk a long way, so the ease of parking, so that you can also pay it easily, makes it very easy to go.” – B

Especially important the accessibility and location were to customers coming for lunch. This is not the time to wander around, but the time to be efficient.

“I go to the shopping center to have lunch. Well, for that the location also stands out as it is so central and close to my workplace, so it is easy to go there.” – G

“I like to go for lunch probably since it is close to my office or where I work, and I like to go there” – A

For those who lived near the city and in walking distance from a shopping center it was a reasonable place to get all the things you need in your everyday life and visits could even be daily. In everyday purchases the significance of social value is smaller (Rintamäki et.al., 2006).

“You see, it is everyday life for me to go to the shopping center. I make my everyday purchases there.” – D

**Table 4. The thematic orientation of convenience.**

Convenience		
Ease	Accessibility	Everyday

#### 5.1.4 Hedonism

As sensibility seemed to be a great part of choosing to go to a shopping center, at least as important seemed to be pursuing hedonistic pleasure and value. In addition to the merchandise, hedonic pleasure was found from participation to events.

“I would say that I visit the shopping center usually if I want something out of the ordinary, some indulgence or gifts or else.” – E

“I like that it brings a feeling of a deli and you can pick up something more special. I think it is the selection that is different, and it brings a different feel to it. Maybe it is something of a different quality and distinct. Perhaps a little bit of an experience as well.” – B

Atmospherics is critical for the customer’s evaluation of quality, customer experience and can also act as an excitement factor (Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman, 1994; Merrilees et al., 2016; Wakefield & Baker, 1998). A pleasant atmosphere encourages consumers to spend more time at the shopping center (Dennis et al., 2010). The environment is especially important for fashion-oriented consumers. (Rahman et al., 2016). Consumers also rely on recall of the last experience in deciding whether to go again and so pleasant experiences best build a strong and regular customer relationship further (Machleit et al., 2000). According to Haque & Rahman (2009) design of the shopping center can help in building recognition and can be an important factor in attracting tenants. Tenants value good opportunities to message to the customer. (Myers et al., 2008.) If it is difficult to differentiate with merchandise; product, price or promotional activities, the place, environment provide opportunities for differentiation (Bell, 1999).

“Those glass surfaces and is it luxurious or what, a nice feeling that it brings light and sense of novelty. I like how it looks when you move around.” – B

“There is a cozy feel to it” – G

Crowding surfaced as the main interfering factor for a pleasant atmosphere on a shopping trip. Crowding creates psychological stress due to excessive stimulation to the sensory system. Perceived crowding is subjective in nature. Some people enjoy it, as some have a low tolerance for it. (Das & Varshneya 2017.) As Machleit et al. (2000) suggest, understanding and expecting crowding in certain times increased the tolerance of it and the effect it had on the experience. So, the crowding was understood as a seasonal thing and something you cannot avoid if you choose to go at certain times. However, some avoidance behavior was due to crowding and could be decreased with reducing psychological costs (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 186).

“I rarely visit the shopping center and always when I do there are so many people that you can barely breathe.” – C

“It feels like there is a lot of people that get packed to the aisles and escalators and so. That is also the feeling I get, and as my husband says, it is distressing when there is a lot of people, but I guess there is nothing you can do about it to avoid it.” – B

In sensory experiences, visual stimulus and the aesthetics in the environment arouse as the most relevant factor regarding the atmosphere and pleasant experience.

“I think it is essential how it looks that is visually appealing with glass and brightness, the esthetics.” – A

“It is eye candy” – D

The search for luxury in the shopping center setting did not refer to high-end brand products but a small escape from everyday life, seeking variety and treating yourself with something special. Exclusiveness in a sense that is something upper scale, although not out of reach for many, but it is not for everywhere. Luxury serves the social value of shopping and builds a sense of status and self-esteem (Rintamäki et al., 2006).

“I like small specialized stores where you cannot find the products elsewhere. You can get porridge elsewhere. If you do not offer anything special, you can buy everything at you everyday supermarket visit.” – E

“Going out for lunch brings variety. And then, I hate the word, but something of an everyday luxury.” – G

The role of food has not been so important in the history but has increased importance in the recent years. Now over half mention dining as a reason to visit a shopping center (Haque & Rahman, 2009). Restaurants, cafes and food courts are now being built to almost every new shopping center (Sit et al., 2003). They provide a well needed break for the shopping trip (Wakefield & Baker, 1998). But in addition, sometimes the restaurant seemed to be the only or main destination which supports the views on them increasing importance in the setting. Investing in restaurants could then bring more and new customers to shopping centers. A shopping center was regarded as a self-evident place for a quick bite but sitting down for a nice dinner did not feel unnatural or unfitting to the shopping center setting either. Restaurants and cafes support social interaction but also were a source of experiences and are important and have value on their own.

“We might especially stop for coffee” – F

“I would meet friends and sit down for a cup of coffee and talk. And I go to the shopping center to have lunch. There are many quick places to eat but not really real restaurants, they are more casual” – G

“Every once in a while, it is nice to go and find experiences from the restaurant as well. I would hope that there would but also other than fast-food restaurants.” – E

**Table 5. The thematic orientation of hedonism.**

Hedonism			
Atmosphere	Aesthetics	Luxury	Food

#### 5.1.5 Merchandise

Merchandise is the ‘core product’ of a shopping center (Levy & Weitz, 2006, p. 190; Smith & Burns, 1996). Four merchandise-related items are identified in the literature are: *assortment, quality, pricing and styling or fashion* (Bell, 1999; Wong et al., 2001).

Main product ranges that the participants mentioned in the research they are looking for in a shopping center were interior and home products, cosmetics, clothing and accessories. It was pointed out that usually the assortments are very similar in different shopping centers and rarely there is something that stands out from the mass. It was mentioned that it feels like the same multi-national chains and brands occupy most of the shopping centers.

“Mostly the same brands are in all of these shopping centers. You would hope that there would be different stores that you cannot find somewhere else.” – B

“If you think of the assortment and the stores, they are quite the same everywhere.” – G

Merchandising and tenant variety induce excitement in a shopping center setting and influence the consumer’s image of the center and desire to stay (Wakefield & Baker, 1998). It was regarded as an important factor in choosing a shopping center that there are a lot of choices and variety in the tenant mix.

“I would hope that the assortment would remain versatile and that there would be something special.” – E

“I go where there are the most choices.” – G

But for some the experiences seemed more important than individual stores.

“If I think what would make me personally or my friends and family to go to the shopping center more often, it would more likely be experiences than a certain store.” – F

A shopping center that offers a large variety of stores is likely to attract more customers as it allows one-stop shopping (Das & Varshneya, 2017). Nevertheless, in some interviews a concern surfaced about not having everything centered in one shopping center or that becoming all there is. In a way, a responsibility about the livelihood of a city was extended to commercial operators. The image of a shopping area is a public good and the success of every store is dependent on others and the image of the whole region. (Bell, 1999.) Therefore, there is also an interest for one operator to take care of the whole attractiveness of the area.

“You can find everything under the same roof although it is partly a sad thing for the city that it feels that everything is centered into one place.”  
– A

“The livelihood of the shopping center has taken away from environment that there are empty spaces and it fazes me. There should be more. I think is negative that it concentrates too much on one area.” – E

The anchors played a big role in participants’ mental images. Some of the meanings were even mixed across the anchors and the shopping center.

“Here is a picture of interior products and tableware and stuff and this reminded me of the department store, and I associate it heavily with brands. I see it as an essential part of the shopping center.” – A

“This picture relates to the supermarket” – B

“I almost know all the salespeople from the supermarket. I would have wanted to find a picture I took when were on a picnic and brought food from there.” – D

“Regarding these pictures, I mostly get advertisements from the department store.” – E

“The color I would the most associate to the shopping center stems from the department store.” – A

As the link between the shopping center and anchor brands is strong, the associations are also more likely to be affected by each other which is also visible in the research. This can be seen as a risk and as an opportunity. Comparable quality is important in these kinds of situations or the more prestigious brand will likely be affected negatively in terms of it. As diversity is important in the shopping center merchandise to ensure an image broad enough, being tightly connected to a small number of brands, like a couple of anchors, can lead to a negative image of a narrow assortment. Lack of distinctiveness of brands can indicate a need for clearer brand architecture. Efficacy, clarity and value can be led through the relationships between brands. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Dooley & Bowie, 2005.)

Also 25 other tenants were mentioned during the interviews but there were no pictures and first associations related to those, which in terms suggest a weaker brand architecture.



Discounts and promotions arose as a factor that motivated a visit to the shopping center.

“This picture reflects that the only reason I visit the shopping center is if I find an exceptional offer in some store.” – C

“Usually I center my purchases to times that there is a discount of some sort.” – A

**Table 6. The thematic orientation of merchandise.**

Merchandise		
Speciality	Anchors	Promotion

#### 5.1.6 *Sense of community*

Different spaces as enablers have been recognized in their role in building a sense of community (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood & Knuiman, 2012; Wu & Lo, 2018). Private space with open access to majority of people can be referred to as a “quasi-public” or “hybrid” space (Button, 2003). Shopping centers are an excellent example of this, and they are also favored by the local residents as important social spaces as already identified (Mantey, 2017; Pyyry, 2016). People tend to choose a shopping center in line with their own socio-economic status. A higher mixing of people from different backgrounds positively contributes to of choosing a shopping center. (Beiró, 2018.)

”It is a social experience going to the shopping center, going for the events and seeing friends and family but you also quickly start talking to others around as well.” – D

“You see people of different ages there. I think it is a mixed bag of people in a positive sense.” – E

Accordingly, responsibility for building the community can be extended to operator like shopping centers by the consumers. Some concern was raised on whether everyone feels they are a part of the community.

“I would hope that a bigger commercial operator could function together with smaller craft businesses and it would build a warm atmosphere locally.” – F

“It is for everyone although I wonder is there anything for the older people especially.” – A

Wishes were expressed that shopping centers would offer and enable communal services like a space for working and studying as well as services like printing and crafts were mentioned.

“A living-room-like study and working space would be nice. Something in between a library and a coffee shop where you could go.” – G

“If there were public services like a high-quality scanner and communal services like craft spots, I would be thrilled. Since it would be something of a community center it should probably be negotiated with the city but maybe it would draw crowd and bring life even though you would have to pay for material expenses for example.” – F

The feeling of not belonging can be compounded as an obstacle for a visit. Therefore, the feeling of being included is important. This can be influenced with developing the tenant mix, for example.

“Who I think the shopping center is for, relates to why I do not go there myself. The offering is mainly for women, women’s clothing or for children.” – C

Facilitating a community is not only limited to the space. Social media can be a significant part of it. Especially the young target group was willing and interested to follow a shopping center in social media and hoped for content that addressed them.

“There is a great social media presence and I follow them too. I think it is good that the information reaches young people as well. I think the content has been targeted well.” – A

It is a habit of especially teenagers to gather to hang out in shopping centers and with their behavior “taking it as their own” (Pyry, 2016). This phenomenon had not been left unnoticed by the participants of this study. The reactions varied with understanding and irritation. Special concern was expressed by parents. For the most part, young

people hanging out did not affect the visits if negative byproducts were not experienced. Yet, for some it was an issue that affected their image of the shopping center and willingness to go there.

“Young people gather there every day.” – E

“It does not bother me personally since I know why they are there since there is no other place but if it would turn into disruption then it would irritate me.” – B

“It definitely effects my image and affects my willingness to go there.” – C

Large retail developments like shopping centers can be flagships for the cities and towns they are located in (Warnaby & Bennison, 2006). The effects of such a development were brought up in the interviews as the effect of the shopping center to the whole city and its image was reflected. A shopping center can build up to be a sight. Willingness for showcasing could be seen as an expression of pride for the community and the space and acknowledgement of its uniqueness, distinctiveness and significance (Kim & Kaplan, 2004).

“It has brought liveliness and a feel of bigger city to this town. I could showcase it to by friends visiting the city.” – F

**Table 7. The thematic orientation of sense of community.**

Sense of community		
Sociable	Belonging	Young people

#### *5.1.7 Inspiration*

Shopping as means to keep up with trends and get information about new product and innovations has not yet been researched extensively although identified already in 1972 by Tauber. To satisfy the need of inspiration, the activities do not need to result in the actual purchase (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003).

“Many kinds of ideas for things like interior, food and for many things you get ideas. It is exciting to see all kinds of people and clothes and styles they have and this also in a way relates to that then you get inspiration for yourself.” – D

In addition to the inspiration, ideas and keeping up with trends by seeing what kind of products there are on the offer, service and the salesperson emerged as a source of inspiration. A superior service encounter was identified in bringing added value to the shopping experience in opposed to online shopping, for example, and can therefore be an important means of competing with increasing online buying behavior. There was even willingness to pay more to get service by an expert.

“I like that if I need help with a purchase, I get service and advice. It is different to a self-service store, but I would pay extra for that the salesperson knows the products exactly. I could also drive a longer way to get that.” – B

“If a go to a store rather than buying online I would hope for service by a specialist that it is not just a face you make the payment to, but it brings added value.” – F

In addition to the products and the service, also the place and atmosphere were identified as sources of inspiration. The modern ambiance with international feel to it were admired as it represented keeping up with the world and having access to fresh ideas and retail setting.

“It is modern.” – G

“There is a South-European feel to it.” – B

“It feels international” – D

**Table 8. The thematic orientation of inspiration.**

Inspiration		
Trends	Service	Modernity

### 5.1.8 *Culture*

Culture and entertainment have not been recognized as an important part of shopping experience and shopping centers for long. This could be explained by a temporal shift in the role of the entertainment at the shopping center from augmented product to the core product or by that different target groups place different value to these. (Myers et al., 2008). Sit et al. (2003) propose that entertainment can be divided into two categories that are special event entertainment and specialty entertainment. The most important distinction between these is the duration or span of the operation (Haynes & Talpade, 1996). Special event entertainment is offered on an occasional basis for a short period of time. In contrast, specialty entertainment is bound to the shopping center's property for a longer duration. (Sit et al., 2003.) Special event entertainment played a bigger role in participants images. Events can also stimulate the social sense of place and feeling of a community (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015; Wu & Lo, 2018).

“There could always be more events.” – D

“I think that it is really nice that there are a lot of events and opportunities like that easily accessible. The events often draw me for a visit.” – A

“The events do make it livelier.” – E

More permanent specialty entertainment surfaced especially in the younger target group. They placed a higher value on variety of entertainment than merchandise and regarded a shopping center as a great place to come and spend time and enjoy themselves.

“If there would be more experiences and when I would probably visit more often rather than only having different products to buy.” – F

Local culture can be brought up with alternating selection and pop-up stores. Always finding something new brings excitement and could generate more regular visits.

“I would hope for more pop-up stores.” – D

“In particular local alternating offering brings coziness and on the other hand the turnover would ensure that there would always be something new to see and find.” – F

Especially the men felt that often the events do not serve their needs and interests. Traditionally shopping centers and retail events have been targeted to women but now also the men show interest in participating and specialty entertainment.

“They are meant for quite a limited target group so that they do not necessarily awaken any interest in me.” – E

“The events could interest me. If there would be an event intriguing enough then I could go even though I do not typically visit the shopping center.” – C

**Table 9. The thematic orientation of culture.**

Culture	
Events	Locality

## **5.2 Construction of meanings attached to a shopping center brand**

Formation of meanings was perceived to take place in three environments the *individual*, *social* and *marketing*. There seemed to be interaction between all of these environments, and it cannot be said that the formation process would concern only one or two of these, but all are overlappingly involved in the process. If one of these was to change, also the meanings and interpretations of them would be likely to change. In the interview's examples and mental models surfaced out of the *individual*, *social* and *marketing* environments but it could not be expressed to which extent these contribute to the overall image. So, the formation of brand meanings can be seen as a sum or outcome of interactions in all of these three environments.

Earlier in this study the shopping centers have been recognized as important places for social interactions. In addition, the meanings also were influenced by the social environment the consumers face and what others think. Nevertheless, it was not seen as imperative for one's own perceptions to fully match those of the social networks. Sometimes the participants asked whether they should be thinking more about what they think themselves or what is the general opinion about the subject. This shows that

there are also clear distinctions made between the perceptions of oneself and others and consumers have a sense of what is the common opinion and reflect their own thinking to it.

“You hear people talking about it.” – D

“I choose a place that me and my company both like and is the most suitable to us.” – G

Marketing has been identified as playing a major role in influencing brand meanings. Marketing measures aim on injecting desirable beliefs about the brand. (Ligas & Cotte, 1999.) The participants of the study had acknowledged that these endeavors exist, but it could not be evaluated how much the marketing efforts had affected the meanings formed. Branding efforts and marketing communications were mentioned as a means of influencing perceptions of a brand.

“If I think of the brand, I do see it as somewhat generating value. I think the branding has been successful.” – F

“I think through social media you get advertisements and information about events and stuff.” – A

In the individual environment participants reflected meanings injected by marketing and their social network and evaluated the relevance of these into their own lives. Ultimately the meanings were considered to be an individual’s interpretation and things were not taken directly as they were given by others. The feel of the brand offering something significant for the individual built strong attachment to it. Therefore, the individual environment is significant in formation of meanings.

“I make up my own conception.” – E

“It is great to be taken into consideration as an individual” – D

Berthon et al. (2009) consider meaning as the product of communication and knowledge base of the recipient (see Figure 2). Participants viewed knowledge like the beliefs injected by marketing and social environment and the individual environment as the stage where the meanings were formed through evaluated relevance to the individual. Therefore, an individual can form different meanings through such

interpretation that are even opposite to those that would transmit from the marketing and social environment. Shared meanings are naturally more dependent on the social environment. The importance of brand knowledge was still identified.

“If I think of what it is intended for, I do not think of this but when I think of myself, it comes to mind. I do not think that it is an image that has been intended to form.” – G

The thematical orientations of brand meanings consumers attach to shopping centers are tightly connected to each other so that it is advisable to examine these together and in connection to each other, rather than any theme on its own. The connections are represented by the lines in Figure 6. The connections were extracted from participants individual mental maps, sorting of the meanings into groups that were seen to have a common nominator and from descriptions of linked themes. The formation of meanings can also be examined through these connections. The thematical orientations can be categorized according to whether they represent utilitarian, social or hedonic value (Rintamäki et al., 2006). *Merchandise* and *convenience* mostly represent the utilitarian value. *Sense of community*, *togetherness* and *culture* on the other hand fall under social value. *Me-time*, *hedonism* and *inspiration* produce hedonic value. Consumers form value by mirroring it to their needs. All levels of needs by Maslow (1943) can be identified from physiological, such as food, to the self-actualization needs, as caring for the community.

The role of hedonism was perceived significant as it was the broadest of the thematic orientations and as it was the theme most connected to others. In addition to the ones already mentioned, hedonism was connected in the participants minds to togetherness, sense of community, merchandise and culture. Basically, it was linked to all the other themes apart from convenience where there is a connection but a somewhat contradictory one. This could signify that the needs consumer's aim on filling with visiting a shopping center are mostly satisfied with hedonistic pleasure. This is comparable to the findings of Wong and Ahuvia (1998) that suggest that hedonic value gratifies the internal, private self which is the dominant part of the self-concept in the Western countries such as Finland.

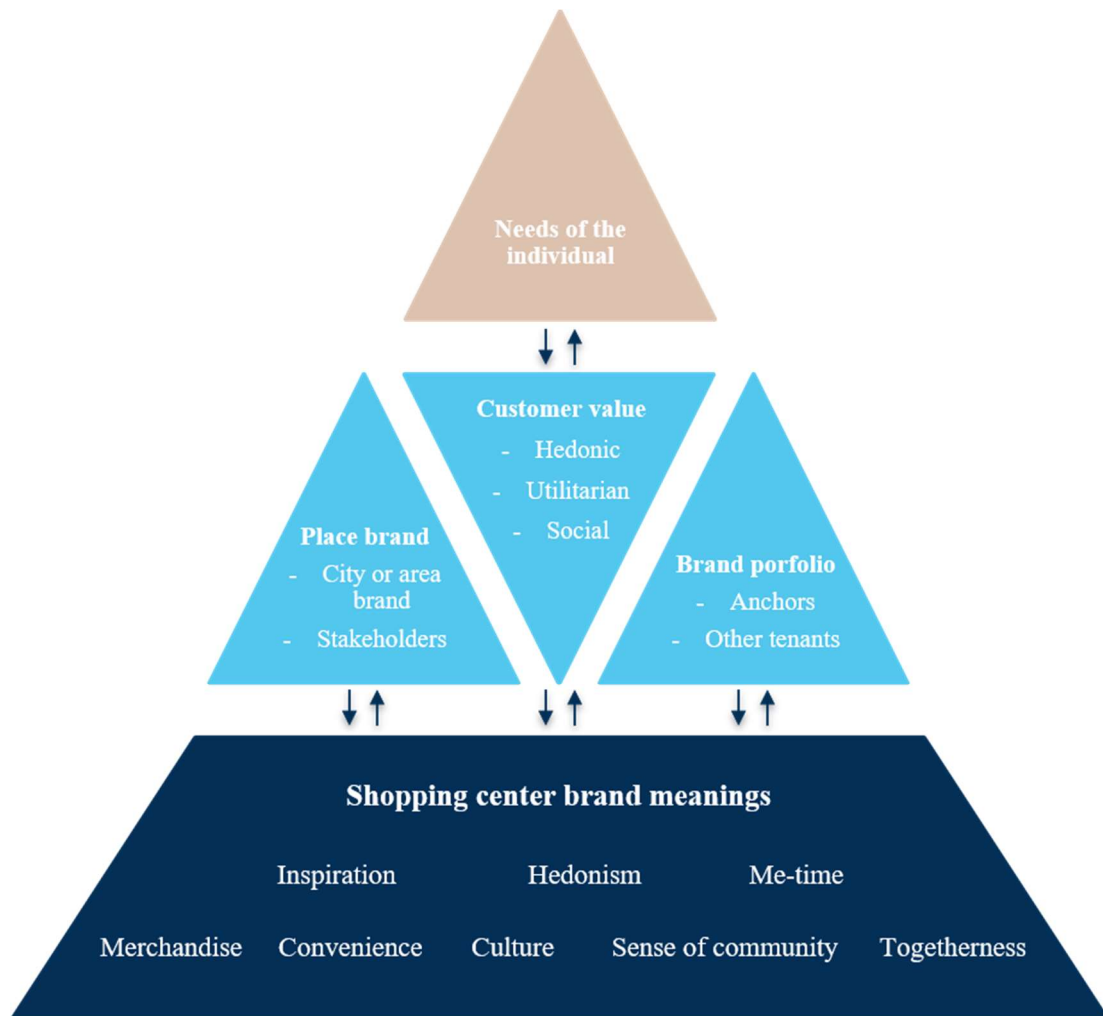


### 5.3 Evaluation and summary of empirical findings

This research addressed meanings attached to a shopping brand. The study was conducted as a case study. In this chapter, a summary of the empirical findings is represented, and the findings are evaluated. Also, the theoretical framework is re-assessed.

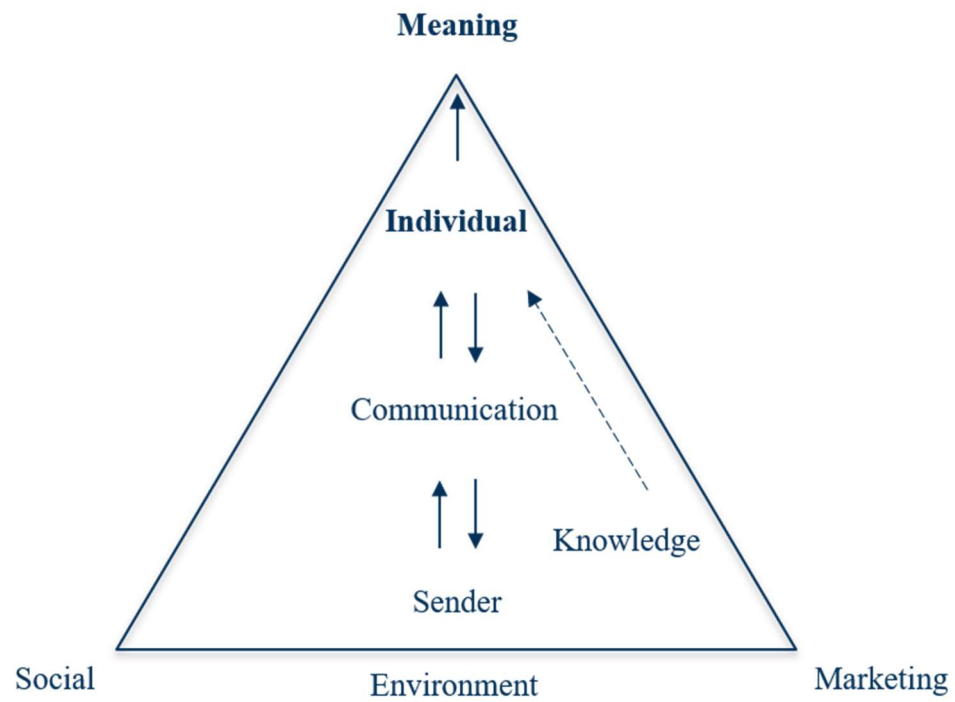
The research produced a collective mental map of meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand. In this process eight thematical orientations discovered which *are togetherness, me-time, convenience, hedonism, merchandise, sense of community, inspiration and culture*. In addition, 23 sub-themes were identified. All of the themes were in close connection to each other and no theme stood alone.

In the theoretical framework the shopping center brand was seen to be affected by place and the place brand, customer value and the brand portfolio. The total customer value was evaluated through the needs of the individual. All these concepts and mechanisms were identified in the empirical research. This strengthens the perception that the shopping center brand is a product of these. The empirical findings were seen to support the theoretical framework and the model on formation of shopping center brand meanings. So, the synthesis of the theoretical framework is complemented with the empirical findings in Figure 7.



**Figure 7. Empirically grounded model of the formation of shopping center brand meanings.**

The formation of brand meanings was identified to take place in three environments, the *individual*, *social* and *marketing*. All of these were detected in the empirical analysis. Nevertheless, the role of the individual and on the other hand, the social and marketing environments was perceived different. The role of the individual was a more mediating one whereas the social and marketing environments were more contextual and contributing to the knowledge. In the individual environment the relevance of the message is evaluated, and personal meaningfulness is attached. Therefore, the model of formation of brand meanings is re-evaluated as follows in Figure 8. More emphasize is given to the role of the individual, influence of knowledge is specified, and it is highlighted that brand meanings are co-created.



**Figure 8. Model on meaning formation re-evaluated based on the empirical findings.**

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Lastly, this chapter summarizes this research study with results and answers to the research questions. Conclusions are presented from theoretical and managerial perspectives. Finally, the reliability and limitations of this study are evaluated and suggestions for further research presented.

### 6.1 Research results and answers to the research questions

The purpose of this study is to build comprehensive understanding of the meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand and how, and develop a model for the formation of shopping center brand meanings. In this study, answers were sought to the following research questions: *What kind of meanings consumers attach to a shopping center and how are brand meanings formed.* Summarily the answer to the first question can be presented from the thematical orientations that surfaced in the empirical analysis. The eight themes of meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand *are togetherness, me-time, convenience, hedonism, merchandise, sense of community, inspiration and culture.*

*Hedonism* was the theme that was the most linked to the other orientations and had the broadest scope of sub-themes. The four sub-themes of meanings identified within hedonism are *atmosphere, aesthetics, luxury and food.* In a world where experiences are increasing in importance, especially in brick and mortar, the hedonistic pleasure and customer experience become crucial factors in determining success in the retail business (Muthiah & Suja, 2017).

Other significant themes rising from the study *are convenience, togetherness, sense of community and merchandise* that were tightly linked to each other as well. Although *merchandise* was an essential factor, it not being clearly the most important, represents the paradigm shift from the traditional way of seeing retail and shopping centers not only as places where you can purchase things. Performing well in terms of merchandise and its sub-themes: *specialty, anchors and promotion* or any other one factor is no longer enough as the consumers' consumption and interest scatter.

To address the latter question on *how the brand meanings are formed* it was identified that meanings form in the interaction of three environments: *the individual, social and marketing*. It is always a product of the communication itself and the knowledge of base of the recipient. Brand knowledge is an important factor in formation of meanings that is highly affected by the social and marketing environments. In the individual environment, meaningfulness is attached after evaluation of personal relevance. Therefore, personal brand meanings can conflict the ones transmitted from marketing and social environments. With common communication to different groups shared meaning only form if the different recipients share a common knowledge base.

The importance of anchor tenants as transmitters of meanings and as the meanings were somehow diluted between the shopping center and its anchor tenants, a need for a clear brand architecture and brand portfolio management can be identified. In addition to this, of course, the choice of anchors is important as meanings seem to be constructed through the anchors. As already mentioned, tight relationship between brands has its negative and positive sides to it when the meanings become shared. A threat emerges if an anchor tenant needs to be changed for some reason as this could affect the brand equity of a shopping center. In achieving overall tightness of the brand architecture and in building the shopping center as the master brand, the tenant mix needs to be carefully selected and managed since compatibility is key between cobranding participants.

## **6.2 Theoretical contribution**

Research should provide novel explanations and information on current theoretical discussions to contribute to a particular body of disciplinary knowledge (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, p. 37). Contributions can take several different forms. Typically, researchers produce contributions on either *method, context* or *theory*. (Ladik & Stewart, 2008.)

According to Ladik and Stewart (2008) *methodological contribution* can be achieved by studying a phenomenon with a method that has not been used before in a similar context. Here, the methodological contribution was utilizing a projective method, the

Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to the study of shopping center brands.

Introducing the thematic orientations of meanings that consumers attach to a shopping center brand can be seen as a *contextual merit* and contribution of this study in the research field. As the previous research is still scattered around the shopping center brand, developing holistic understanding on the subject should build foundation and help further research. The objective of this study was not to produce straight generalizations but build deeper understanding, as already mentioned. Conducting a case study utilizing the ZMET-method served this orientation well. Although the research was conducted as an intensive case study of one shopping center, the empirical findings of meanings consumers attach to a shopping center brand can be extended and applied to other similar cases.

Most of the findings relating to meanings attached to a shopping center brand were consistent with previous research done in the retail industry in other settings (Anuradha & Manohar, 2011; Bloch, Ridgway, & Dawson, 1994; Merrilees et al., 2016; Mittal & Jhamb, 2016; Sit et al., 2003), but the role of *inspiration* and *me-time* were novel to the field. Customers long for inspiration from a shopping trip and can even consider it as a relaxing and meaningful way to spend their time. The search for inspiration and me-time are significant new motivators for shopping.

This study was able to develop a model for the formation of shopping center brand meanings and so determine from what elements these consist of. This is a *theoretical contribution* since no such model has been presented in previous research and the big picture has been at the shadow of single factors such as shopping center attractiveness. For the first time this research suggested defining brand architecture and the use of methods of brand portfolio management in multi-brand shopping center context in addition to place branding.

In this research also the theory on brand meanings and how they are formed was developed further. The different environments that brand meanings for have been treated equal and similar in earlier academic discussions (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), but this research revealed that the role of the individual is more significant than the social

and marketing environments. Consumers assess the relevance of messages and its personal meaningfulness individually. Simultaneously this affects the role of knowledge in formation of brand meanings. Berthon et al. (2009) have suggested that brand knowledge affects meanings, but it seems that actually knowledge is largely originating from the social and marketing environments and does not affect the meanings directly, but the individual has a mediating role in this process as well. To conclude, the meanings can be influenced by marketing and the social network but in the end, the individual decides consciously or subconsciously what is actually meaningful and how.

In summary this research was able to provide all; methodological, contextual and theoretical contributions and fill in the research gap of comprehensive understanding about shopping center brand meanings and develop models for the formation of brand meanings. Such knowledge can be used in the future as the basis for further research and brand management.

### **6.3 Managerial implications**

The first managerial implication of this study is the versatile and multifaceted nature of brand meanings associated with a shopping center brand. The collective mental map represents the variety of brand meanings consumers might approach a shopping center from and what kind of things are appreciated. The thematic orientations represent utilitarian, social and hedonistic motivations and could be utilized in building shopping center brand strategy, positioning and segmentation. It is recommended that brand managers focus on one to three themes rather than trying to cover them all. In the attempt such compromise is usually needed that the brand might not end up covering any theme fully and not serving anyone.

This research revealed expectations consumers have on shopping centers. They are regarded as important operators in the cities they are located in. Consumers also extended social responsibility on developing the community to such an operator. This poses a challenge and opportunity on shopping center management to respond to these expectations but also reveals consumers attachment to shopping centers. It seems that brand recall is rarely the key struggle for shopping center brand management.

Shopping center management should focus on creating appealing and attractive atmospherics that attract visitors but also co-visitors. Offering intriguing spaces for social recreations is a way of enabling and supporting social interactions in the shopping center.

It is in marketing professionals' interest to affect the brand meanings consumers attach to their brands to be able to develop the brand relationships. Brand management should be aware of the mechanisms of brand meaning formation. The roles of the social, marketing and individual environment are all different but interactive. Developing brand knowledge is way to also affect brand meanings. Shared meanings require a common knowledge base that would suggest a need for careful segmentation and targeting for marketing communications.

Consumers seemed to think the tenant mixes of shopping centers are unvaried and same brands recur everywhere. This reflects the lack of specialization and brand positioning of shopping centers. On the other hand, there seems to be a lot of potential in profiling and managing the tenant mix in a strategical way. This study recommends defining a brand architecture for a shopping center and utilizing brand portfolio management. This in turn calls for conformity within the tenant mix. Differentiation and standing out is an important source of competitive advantage in the market. Offering experiences and inspiration as well as investing in the atmospherics seem to be rising trends and a way to the consumers' hearts. Most of the detected emotional attachment was associated with the design and atmosphere and emotions have been indicated having a crucial role in evaluations processes and so influencing future behavior and positive word-of-mouth (Grace & O'Cass, 2005).

#### **6.4 Evaluation of the research quality and limitations**

The predominant requirement for research no matter quantitative or qualitative is that it should be implemented to be repeatable and that the research conclusions should be justified (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen, 2005, p. 30).

The quality of a research can be evaluated through the concepts of validity and reliability. Validity refers to the research's ability to cover the subject that is intended



to and so that the findings are adept. Validity is constructed of internal and external aspect. Internal liability signifies the inner logic and consistency throughout the study. External validity refers to the whether interpretation of the research can be extended or generalized from the examined case. Reliability describes the consistency of research findings covering the same phenomenon. In other words, how systematically research that covers the same issues reaches same results. It is notable that the concepts of reliability and validity are only suitable for the evaluation of a qualitative study to a certain extent, since they are only significant in some of the contexts. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 2007, pp. 226–227; Koskinen et al., 2005, pp. 253–257.) Therefore, in this study's context as well, they mainly act as general guiding principles for its progress and the choices made.

The reliability of qualitative research depends on the sensitiveness of the analysis. The researcher needs to be open to interpret the material in the light of new findings. (Koskinen et al., 2005, p. 244.) Still, all qualitative research relies on the interpretation of the researcher to some extent (Hirsjärvi et al., 2007, pp. 156–161), and existing preconceptions cannot be excluded from the research setting (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), and can be seen as one factor affecting the reliability of this research. In the analysis this is addressed by providing the reader concrete examples in the form of quotations as a basis for the interpretations made. A qualitative research using in-depth interviews cannot provide statistically generalizable information (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327). This is acknowledged and the purpose of this research was to understand the chosen phenomenon deeply and more comprehensively.

Attention has been paid to justification of choices made in different stages and over the course of this research to increase reliability (Hirsjärvi et al., 2007, p. 227). The goal was to achieve transparency to the reader. Accordingly, the study should be better understood and also repeatable. In the interviews, the steps of the ZMET-method were carefully followed. However, some misunderstanding might affect participants' comprehension of the questions in a different manner than was intended. The transcription was done carefully word-to-word and notes taken during the interview to better understand the contexts behind statements. Conducting the interviews in the interviewees and participants first language can be seen to increase easier expression and correct understanding. Nevertheless, the translation of the quotations to English

can compromise the transmission of cultural contexts, for example. The interviewees were awarded with a 50 € gift card for taking part in the study. This might have affected who signed up as volunteer for the interviews but was also a way to ensure getting sufficient amount of people to choose a versatile sample from.

One way to evaluate empirical data is to through the concept of saturation. When saturation occurs, the answers of the respondents start to become repeatedly alike, and no new information would be acquired through additional interviews. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2007, p. 177.) Saturation increases the reliability of the research. In this study, similar answers started to appear after the fourth interview out of seven. Still, an even larger sample could have increased the reliability of the research or the use of triangulation which includes several different methods or researchers to the same study (Hirsjärvi et al., 2007, pp. 226–228).

The quality of the research was also considered in choosing the research method. A projective technique like the one utilized in this research helps people in expressing their true feelings and tacit knowledge and can help in achieving greater validity and fidelity than would be possible with direct methods (Mulvey & Kavalam, 2010). On the other hand, the use of intensive case study method and so examining only one shopping center can be seen as a restriction of this study in terms of reliability and generalization. Examining several cases would have increased the quality of the research but was not possible due to the extent of this thesis and not having access to more data. According to Stake (1995) uniqueness of individual cases and contexts are also important in building understanding. Examining a single case close enough can also reveal what is significant in terms of the phenomenon or what recurs in examining it on a more general level (Hirsjärvi et al., 2007, p. 177).

## **6.5 Suggestions for further research**

The interests of this research, brand meanings and the shopping center brand are still quite novel to scientific research practice and would still benefit from overall development of concepts and theory. There still needs to be more research done to understand the phenomena comprehensively.

More precisely, this research identified eight thematical orientations of meanings that consumers attach to a shopping center brand and 23 sub-themes. To continue the study on shopping center brand meanings these themes could be tested in different age groups and cultures to understand whether they are universal. Most of the findings were consistent with previous research done in other retail settings but it remains unknown whether the meanings found in this study are exclusive to shopping centers in the big picture or could they be applied to other retail settings. Also, a quantitative research grasp could evaluate the relevance of these themes in relation to each other and confirm the connections between themes.

This is an intensive case study that addressed one traditional, medium size shopping center that is located in a city center. Conducting case studies on other shopping centers would enable comparison between different kind of shopping centers. This would enhance the generalization of concepts to shopping centers in general.

Lastly, as hedonism emerged as a significant theme in shopping center brand meanings it would be interesting to examine its importance to consumers and the expectations this poses to the retail industry. There is a lot of discussion on the experience economy but the true implications of it have not been unraveled especially in Finland that probably has not yet seen all the effects.

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**Appendix 1****OUTLINE OF THE INTERVIEW IN ENGLISH****Kauppakeskusbrändiin liitettävät merkitykset**

Haastattelua varten keräsit etukäteen 7-10 kuvaa. Missä muodossa ne sinulla on mukana? Millaiselta tehtävä tuntui?

- 1) Kuvaile valitsemiasi kuvia yksitellen. Miksi valitsit juuri ne? Onko kuvien takana jonkinlaisia tarinoita?
- 2) Puuttuuko joukosta jokin kuva? Jäikö jokin kuva löytymättä?
- 3) Miten ryhmittelisit kuvia 2-4 ryhmään? Onko joukossa täysin samaa tarkoittavia kuvia?
- 4) Ovatko jotkut kuvat samanlaisia keskenään, miten? Ovatko jotkut kuvat erilaisia keskenään, miten? Onko näistä kolmesta kuvasta kaksi kuvaa jollakin tavalla samanlaisia keskenään ja yksi erilainen?
- 5) Mikä kuvista on edustaa parhaiten näkemystäsi brändistä tai siitä millainen kauppakeskus x on?
- 6) Mikä kuvista kuvaa aihetta huonoiten? Onko joukossa kuvia, jotka ovat jollakin tavalla toistensa vastakohtia?
- 7) Herättääkö brändi sinussa jotakin tuntemuksia, joita kuvat voisivat kuvata? Edustaako jokin tai jotkut kuvista sitä miltä brändi mielestäsi maistuu, tuntuu, tuoksuu tai kuulostaa? Edustaako jokin kuvista sitä minkä värisenä pidät brändiä tai mitä se saa tuntemaan?
- 8) Edellisten kysymysten perusteella haluaisitko järjestää kuvat jonkinlaiseen muodostelmaan kuvamaan niiden tai niiden edustamien asioiden suhdetta toisiinsa kuten mielikuvakartaksi?

## Appendix 2

### OUTLINE OF THE INTERVIEW IN FINNISH

#### Shopping center brand meanings

For the interview you gathered 7-10 pictures in beforehand. In what form did you have those. How did this assignment feel like?

- 1) Describe the pictures you chose one by one. Why did you choose those pictures in particular? Are there some stories to be told about the pictures?
- 2) Is there a picture missing from the bunch? Were you not able to find any picture you wanted to?
- 3) How would you sort the pictures into 2-4 groups? Are there any pictures that represent absolutely the same?
- 4) Are some of the pictures similar to one another, how? Are some of the pictures different to one another, how? Are any of two of these three pictures similar to each other and one somehow different?
- 5) Which of the pictures is the most representative of your view on the brand or what kind is the shopping center x?
- 6) Which of the pictures is the least representative picture? Are there any pictures in the bunch that are totally opposite to each other?
- 7) Does the brand evoke any emotions in you that the pictures could represent? Do the pictures represent sensory feelings that the brand evokes in you, for example how the brand tastes, feels, smells or sounds like? Does any of the pictures represent a color you attach to the brand or how it makes you feel?
- 8) According to the previous questions would you like to arrange the pictures in some formation like a mind map, to describe their relation to each other or the things they represent?